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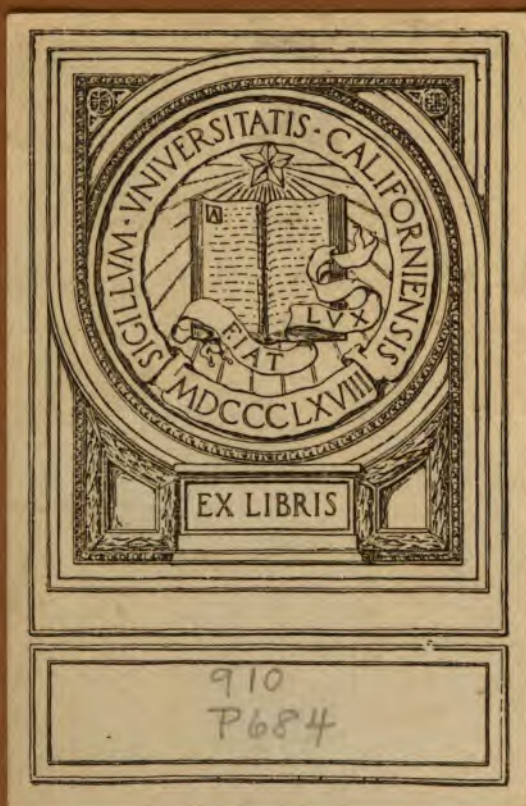
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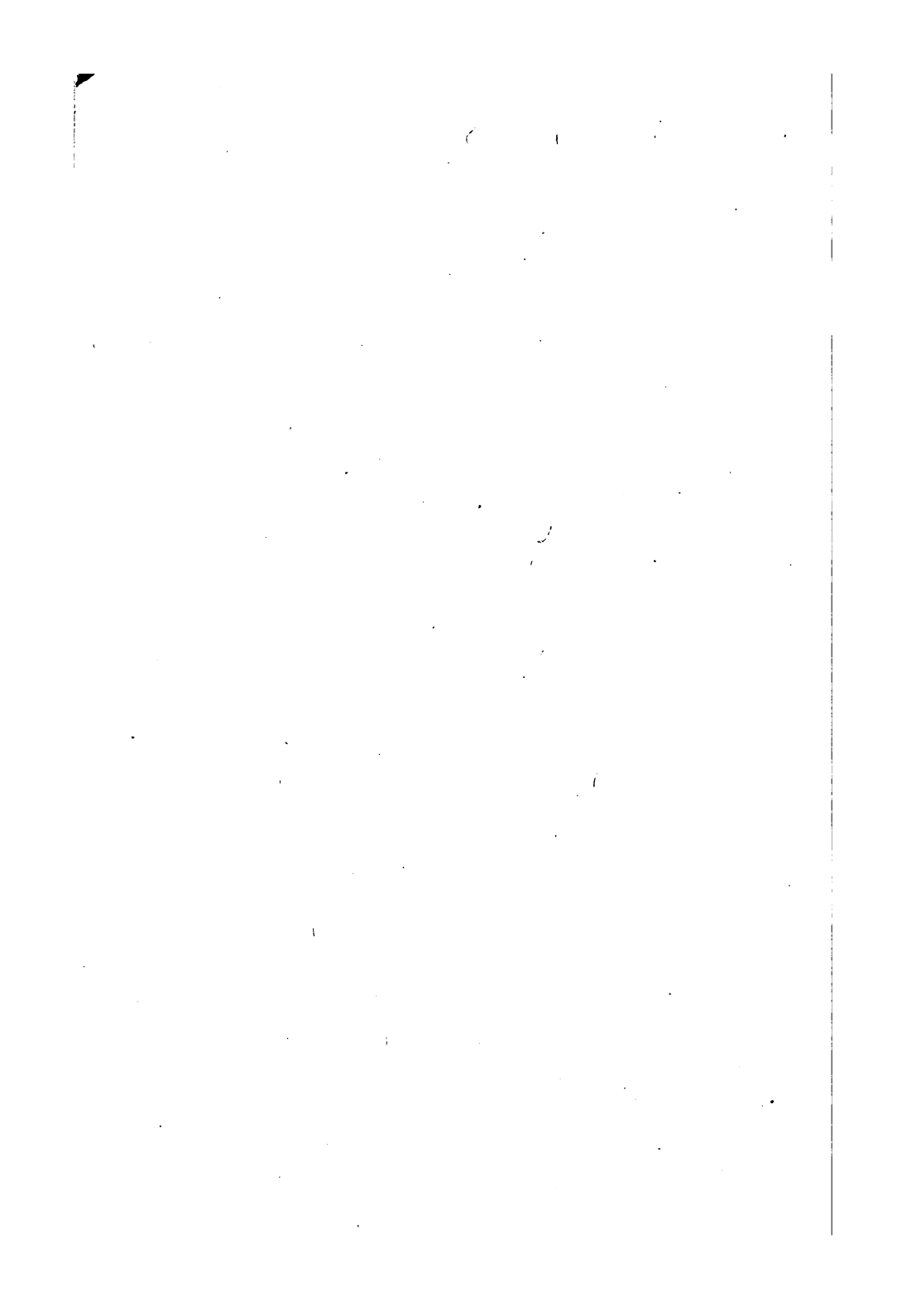


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**The  
Art and the Business of  
Story Writing**



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# The Art and the Business of Story Writing

BY

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of Columbia University.*

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TO WHOM  
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## TO THE TEACHER

This book is an outgrowth of the belief that fiction has a technique no less definite, though much less rigid, than the technique of perspective drawing or of harmony and counterpoint in music. Such a conviction is not easily reached, for the laws of story construction elude their many searchers with a persistence most exasperating. The long-discouraged investigator naturally falls into the thought that pure anarchy reigns in the domain of fantasy; and he disguises the absurdity of this thought under the hypothesis that a story is the free creation of mind, spontaneous in origin and in manner of outworking. Unfortunately for the development of fictional technique, the half-truth of the hypothesis helps to conceal the flaw in his argument. There is no doubt that, in some sense, a story is a free creation and spontaneous; and freedom seems to connote a certain emancipation from law: hence the plausibility of saying that the fiction writer works without rule or principle, following only the caprice of his imagination. The inference, however, is only plausible. There is no soundness in it; and, were we here discussing ethics or metaphysics, we might demonstrate this assertion by pointing out that free creation and spontaneity do not involve unpatterned behavior nor blind, impulsive fashioning. If chaos lurks anywhere in the whole performance, it lurks only in the primitive uprush of fleeting, disjointed imageries which precede, suggest, and inspire the work of art. The work of art, as Poe and many another have said, is a piece of cunning and calculation no less deliberate than the selling-price of umbrellas; and, once more like this computation, the artistry of the fiction writer is regulated by two elemental factors, his own purposes and his material. If he has not discovered the principles in these which direct his choice, it is because they are prodigiously intricate.

The technique of pictorial composition was early dis-



covered, not because painters are cleverer than novelists, but because the painter's material is comparatively simple. His purpose is to depict Things as They Are Seen. Now, these arrange themselves in space according to a few easily detectable mathematical laws, namely the laws of perspective, while their colors and the harmonies of them reduce to a dozen relations most of which even the untrained eye partially discerns. So too with the stuff of music, which, as the philosopher Pythagoras discovered twenty-five centuries ago, orders itself according to a few elementary ratios which, in symphony and opera, assume a bewildering complexity quite unlike their pure nature. It is not alone the simplicity of musical and pictorial principles that has brought them so speedily to light. They are obvious by virtue of two other peculiarities: first, the physical stability and definiteness of their materials; and, secondly, the kinship of all the materials they relate. Space forms, colors, and sounds are physical things which may be produced at will, isolated for scrutiny, arranged and analyzed by the aid of mechanical instruments. Thus through sheer accessibility, they aid their investigator. And, in the second place, the significant relations within each of the arts which deal with such materials are relations among homogeneous things. That is to say, harmony is a relation between tone and tone, perspective is a relation between mass and mass in space, and color laws are relations between hue and hue. Broadly speaking, we may say that all such relations are much clearer than those which obtain between heterogeneous things. In evidence of this fact, we have only to observe the peculiarly difficult material of the story writer.

His objects are what Aristotle saw them to be, "men in action." It is human nature, as it manifests itself in behavior, that he manipulates imaginatively, endows with strangely beautiful forms, and sometimes copies. But what is this human nature? Nobody knows. The most we can say of it is that it embraces a curious horde of contrary impulses, likes and dislikes, retrospects and fore-sights, all more or less organized for the furtherance of life and the mastery of affairs physical. These warring factors bear, in many instances, not the remotest likeness

one to another. So different are they in flavor, power, and direction that some persons deny their relationship altogether, saying with Paul that they belong to two men, or saying with modern psychiatry that they belong to a multiple personality. Hunger and an eye for beauty are alien capacities; yet both enter into life, qualifying its configurations. Your sense of justice and your day-dreams are infinitely more different than are the bass drum and the violin which Wagner brings into harmony; yet somehow they combine in your character and contribute to it. Finally—crassest heterogeneity of all—there come together in every incident of human life those two efficiencies commonly called the psychical and the physical, mind and matter, soul and body. All conduct, actual and prospective, matter-of-fact and fantastic, thoughtless and reasoned, is inextricably bound up with the stuff of which temples and turnips are made. No man can do anything, however trivial, without doing it to something or for the sake of something. His nature, we might better say, is neither fulfilled nor expressed save insofar as he changes his environment, or at least actually perpetuates its *status quo*. He is known, not by his faith but only by his works. Indeed, we must say even more. His beliefs, his most unworldly thoughts are, as revelations and tests of his character, utterly meaningless except they refer to the furniture and lodgers of the world visible. Strip a man of the gold toward which avarice drives him, of the fleshpots he craves, of the enemies he loathes, of the shouting in the marketplace which ambition sighs for, and of every other substance of his appetites and antipathies; and there will remain of him a formless and unnamable nothing, so far as any human vision or insight reaches. Literally, all these things give body to his soul. Only by their aid does his character take on solidity and contour.

In this state of affairs, it seems to me, is the ancient obstacle of a sound literary technique; and here too whispers the hint of its removal. The fiction writer would depict human character, in some of its phases; the laws of its present presentation must be found in the material of human character; this material includes a great variety of alien, discordant elements mental and physical; only certain combinations of these are possible

and a much smaller number is pleasing; and so the writer's first task is to discover such. But what does this undertaking entail, if not an analysis of those very elements? He must proceed exactly as painter and musical composer do. They find the major laws of their techniques in the qualities and relations of their raw material, namely in space forms and colors, in tones and rhythm forms. Mastery of these is an indispensable forerunner of every good picture and melody. So too with good fiction; it is impossible without a thorough, though perhaps very much restricted, knowledge of the mind's workings and of the world it works over.

If this is true, then the laws of fiction are not to be sought in rhetoric, which is the science of conveying ideas effectively and not at all the art of shaping the subject matter conveyed. Neither are they to be found through the study of literary styles; for style proves to be either the more refined, more personal way of conveying thoughts or else an inexact name for the peculiar objects which a given artist is fond of reporting to us. No, the novelist's and the story writer's constructive principles lie in no such direction; they lie wholly in the realms of psychology and worldly wisdom. The patterns of life are revealed only in life; and life is composed of people and affairs.

The following introduction to fictional technique attempts to give the learner a few hints about the broadest characteristics of human conduct, especially those which fix the dramatic relation of man to his environment. My approach to this topic has been set in advance by modern psychology, especially by the writings of John Dewey; but in every other respect my analysis owes most to modern stories and their masters. It is, indeed, primarily an empirical research, not a detached theory; its findings have been drawn from those same stories, or at least verified in them. Like every other investigation of human nature, it has encountered depths and entanglements which refuse to be cleared up in a pretty epigram or to be evaded with a loose generalization. Wherever that has happened, I have chosen the less pleasant path. I have described several problems in language which may well bewilder those students who know little of con-

temporary psychology, and may even persuade them that, if all this be fictional technique, then they will never manage to write stories. This danger prompts me to address the teacher here.

It is the teacher's business to say what a brief text-book must leave unsaid, to furnish details where it can only throw out suggestions, and to correct its erroneous or misleading statements. In fictional technique these duties become peculiarly arduous, for they require him to pursue psychological analyses and to discourse upon all the everyday affairs which figure in dramatic situations. He becomes perforce a Professor of Things in General. And I believe he will succeed in the measure that he frankly accepts this title and leads his classes to scrutinize mankind as the draughtsman scrutinizes masses, outlines, and distances. How he shall accomplish this in detail he alone can discover; for his method depends intimately upon his fund of information, his philosophy of life, and his instinctive manner of dealing with people. But there are at least three general rules which should bind him: he should forget rhetoric, he should preach no imitation of masterpieces, and he should compel students to write much. The last rule requires no comment. As for the first, the student who has difficulty in choosing the right word or ending a sentence must not be allowed to air such troubles before a class in story technique, which is concerned with wholly different problems. It is hard enough, at best, to hold fictional structure and rhetoric apart in the average beginner's mind; rather than increase the difficulty, it is advisable to tolerate a moderate amount of bad writing. As for the imitation of masterpieces, it is harmful chiefly because it turns the writer from his proper subject-matter and so postpones his hour of insight. A great story is a picture of human nature, it is not human nature itself. Being a picture, it lights up some one little spot of life and presents this in magnificent isolation. Always it presents an individual, a peculiar dramatic situation, and a somewhat unique solution. But this very triumph of art tends to hide from the student of technique what he most passionately seeks, which is the laws and not the instances of life. To ape the appropriate language of Plato, the concrete

individual blurs and distorts the 'pure forms' of human nature; and this too in spite of the fact that these 'forms' are all the principles peculiar to individual life. The heroes and heroines of the hundred best stories tell us too little about life, precisely as the hundred best paintings fall far short of revealing the laws of color and composition. They produce a vivid impression, but not understanding.

The final test of every technique is its usefulness in practice. So judged, the following studies seem to possess a certain value. They have been employed during the past three years in teaching about two hundred students, of whom nearly fifty have been journalists and unattached professional writers. Stories prepared merely as class exercises in that period have been sold to all types of periodicals, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Everybody's*, *The American*, *The Outlook*, and many others equally prominent. Incomplete records show, for these same school-room products, the students have received nearly five thousand dollars. Most of the MSS., though not the best of them, came from previously unsuccessful pens.

## TO THE STUDENT

This book will not aid you in the use of English. It is a study of the story writer's subject-matter and, somewhat incidentally, of his commercial problems and prospects. It presupposes in you an easy command of simple narrative writing.

Many important points in the text will not appear unless you read in advance the stories there cited to illustrate them. You should run through each of these stories twice; once naturally and without analysis or criticism, and once again in a technical mood, after having studied the text.

The majority of citations are drawn from the following works:

Balzac, Honoré de—*Little French Masterpieces*, vol. 4 (Putnam, 1909).

Coppée, François—*Tales* (Harper's, 1890).

Daudet, Alphonse—*Little French Masterpieces*, vol. 5 (Putnam, 1909).

Deland, Margaret—*Old Chester Tales* (Harper's, 1898).

Galsworthy, John—*A Motley* (Scribner's, 1910).

O. Henry—*The Four Million* (Doubleday, Page, 1909).

—*Strictly Business* (Doubleday, Page, 1909).

—*Whirligigs* (Doubleday, Page).

Howells, W. D.—*A Pair of Patient Lovers* (Harper's, 1901).

James, Henry—*The Wheel of Time* (Harper's, 1893).

Kipling, Rudyard—*Under the Deodars*, etc. (Doubleday, Page).

London, Jack—*Love of Life* (Macmillan, 1907).

Maupassant, Guy de—*Little French Masterpieces*, vol. 6 (Putnam, 1909).

Moore, George—*The Untilled Field* (Lippincott, 1903).

Morris, Gouverneur—*It* (Scribner's, 1912).

Poe, E. A.—*Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. In *Everyman's Library* (Dutton).



White, Wm. Allen—*In Our Town* (The Macmillan Company, 1909).

Wilkins, Mary E. (Mrs. Freeman)—*A Humble Romance* (Harper's, 1887).

Perhaps it is not foolish to say here that not all of these stories are models of fictional art. They are chosen for analysis because they present certain striking virtues or certain equally conspicuous defects, and also because they represent the extremes of taste, style, and intellectuality. It is in its applications to such widely divergent types of fiction that a theory of technique is put to its severest test.

The exercises at the ends of chapters are very important. However distasteful some of them may be, you should complete them conscientiously. They cannot be dashed off. A swift writer may finish them all in about two thousand hours, but most students will consume three thousand or more.

Do not be frightened if, after several months of hard work, you find your writings stiffer and clumsier than ever. This deterioration commonly accompanies the early stages of technical study in all the arts and it does not disappear until the principles of technique have become established habits and, as it were, apply themselves in all the writer's thinking. For this reason, half-mastery of technique is slavery. Whoever begins the work should make earnest with it and conquer it, though he labor five years.

The best things written on story technique lie scattered thinly up and down the long shelves of our libraries. Here a paragraph in an essay, there a newspaper interview with some author lies buried in the files and archives; and beyond these there is little. Three books there are, though, which the serious student may profitably consult on many points. The first is Clayton Hamilton's *The Materials and Methods of Fiction* (Baker & Taylor, 1908). Though chiefly concerned with the technique of the novel—and in its generalities rather than in its details—the volume cannot fail to stimulate and enlighten the student, in spite of the fact that Mr. Hamilton's point of view and several of his most fundamental distinctions

are, in my opinion, incorrect. The second work to be recommended is Bliss Perry's *A Study of Prose Fiction* (Houghton Mifflin). In common repute, this deals with fictional technique; in truth, though, it does so but slightly. It is rather a survey and estimate of authors and their ideals. It bears the same relation to genuine technique that, say, an appreciation of Chopin's musical manner does to Jadassohn's *Manual of Harmony*. Nevertheless, as in every clear-sighted study of masterpieces, so here; there are developed not a few principles and ideals vital to one's understanding of literary craftsmanship. The third book is J. B. Esenwein's *Writing the Short Story* (Hinds & Noble, 1908). As its title-page indicates, this is 'a practical handbook'; and it possesses all the virtues and all the defects of such. As an analysis of technique, it is almost worthless and often ludicrous. It affords the reader no more insight into the basic laws of dramatic action and expression than Baedeker's *Guide to Paris* does into French character. But as a collection of adages, quotations from celebrities, story specimens, references, and commercial advices, it earns a place on the young writer's table.

There are, of course, many other books on the short story; but those which are good are either history or criticism and hence not shaped to the purposes of the would-be writer. So they are not mentioned here.

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# THE ART AND THE BUSINESS OF STORY WRITING

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE PURPOSES

1. *Why write fiction?* This question may seem impertinent, at the beginning of a book which will be read chiefly by persons who have resolved to write fiction. But it is not. It leads us into a problem that must be squarely faced and cleanly solved by each man for himself, before he enters seriously upon literary work. That problem has to do with the *purposes* of such an undertaking.

Purposes shape one's conduct in literature no less than in war, love, and politics. Whether the author knows it or not, every plot he invents and every turn he gives to its telling are qualified by the *use* he hopes to make of the finished product. It matters not whether he writes according to some editor's order or to establish a creed or simply to delight himself; the influence of the aim is ever present, subtle and pervasive. So deep is it that many a story theme takes on a very different form with each new purpose of the writer's. Again, some themes and modes of treatment are wonderfully adapted to certain ends and impossible for others. Thus, the severe and swift art of which Maupassant was so fond is peculiarly the weapon of a writer who is more interested in conveying an impression than in interpreting human

## 2 SHORT STORY WRITING

nature or affairs. Other technical devices have their own exclusive utility, which we shall inspect in other chapters. Hardly any material of fiction or any narrative principle can be employed without regard to the aim of the particular piece of writing attempted.

If this is true, it must be evident that whoever writes fiction aimlessly, never surveying the various advantages of the work nor choosing one advantage as the end to be sought, foredooms himself to much grief. He may win out, in the long run; but his victory will be dearly won. He will probably spend years writing for the public stories which please only himself, and he may wreck his natural style by trying to make it serve an end which it cannot attain. This becomes clear the moment we consider the legitimate purposes of writing fiction.

2. *The four ends of writing fiction.* There are four obvious rational desires which might, singly or collectively, urge a man to compose a story. First, he might wish for the private gratification of expressing his own fancies. Secondly, he might hope to acquire, through practice, an intimate knowledge of literary values which would heighten his appreciation of books and men. In the third place, he might seek a livelihood by entertaining a large circle of readers. Or, finally, he might aspire to expose some sham, to crush some public infamy, to raise some all but forgotten ideal, or otherwise to better the world. Private pleasure, self-culture, profit, and social service; these are the prospects which may allure. And now a word about each.

a. *Writing for pleasure.* People differ astonishingly in the immediate satisfaction they gain from imaginative writing. Many who are gifted compose without joy or even with antipathy; and many who are not swept into raptures at every inconsequential motion of their mediocre wits. It is important to observe this fact here, because

of the prevalent instinctive superstition that whoever has a strong impulse to write and finds much pleasure in yielding to it is endowed with those talents which publishers are eager to engage. That this is a superstition and nothing more, every experienced writer and critic knows. There is only the most tenuous connection between the market value of a tale and the fun one gets from producing it.

Consider two opposite modern instances, Edna Ferber and Gellert Burgess. If newspaper interviews are to be trusted, Miss Ferber drags herself gloomily to her faithful typewriter, for the composing of an Emma McChesney story. Nevertheless, her output is the very highest grade of ephemeral writing, immensely popular and correspondingly profitable. How different Burgess and his *Lady Méchante*! In the confessional introduction to this weird volume, he admits that he is out for a lark and that he is having a glorious time compiling these *Precious Episodes in the Life of a Naughty Nonpareille*. You can fairly hear him chuckling behind every sentence. But what is the material outcome of this hilarity? 'Helter-skelter rigmarole,' Burgess calls the book; and nobody will challenge the opinion. It reeks with jests comprehensible only to the few who happen to have thought about some things precisely as the author has. Its satire is such as can be sensed from only one point of view, and this point of view cannot be attained save by following Burgess through life and seeing the world through Burgess' eyes. If you have done this, you may scream over some chapters of *Lady Méchante*. If you haven't, you will fling the book into the waste basket before you have finished the first page.

Now, the moral of this contrast is clear. Story writing may serve as a merely private entertainment, almost as private as the child's game of making faces at himself in a

mirror. If you write only for this purpose, do not expect the world to enjoy your inventions. Probably it will not; and the chances of its doing so dwindle in the same measure that your personal experiences, temperament, and interests deviate from those of the ordinary man. Whether it is worth while to write stories that no public will read is a question which each man must answer for himself. It lies beyond the jurisdiction of critic and editor. That not a few persons do write—and write well—in secret, neither hoping nor wishing to reach a public, is pretty certain. I know two such authors in New York City; they have produced stories worthy of the best magazines, but they will not sell them. They write tales as they play the piano, 'just for fun.' Being rich, they are not tempted by the market's rewards. Being cultured, the alleged fame of the fictionist does not dazzle them. And I doubt not that there are many others like them.

b. *Writing for self-culture.* I suppose nobody save a handful of literary critics deliberately writes fiction in order to acquire fresh insight into the thoughts of great writers, their style, and the technique of the art. In our schools and colleges almost every other literary form is extensively practiced, but especially by the essay. Students are requested to write essays and essays: essays on Burke, essays on *In Memoriam*, essays on *The Right and The Wrong*, essays on Wagner's *leitmotive*, essays on Kipling's *Things as They Are*, and Heaven knows what else. Now, I doubt whether such a program cultivates self-expression and critical sensitivity as well as half the amount of drill in imaginative narrative would. It is notorious that the essay is one of the most difficult of all enterprises with the pen; some would say the stubbornest. There are more excellent fictionists than moderately competent essayists, and over against every five master

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novelists stands not more than one master of the essay. This is no accident; it is due chiefly to the intrinsic realism and philosophical bias of the essay. The fabric of every essay must be fact. Its author must have something to say about some state of affairs in the world. He may have misunderstood these affairs, or he may be grossly prejudiced toward them, or he may perceive them in a commonplace way; but he cannot write effectively unless he holds a clear opinion about them and can defend it with arguments. This is an inflexible rule, applying not only to the smooth solemnities of a Macaulay but also to the genial essay, which Dr. Crothers has lately revived with such success. Even in its most whimsical flights, the essayist's pen is ever pressing hard against Circumstance. It is Circumstance and nothing else that provokes him to write, and it is about Circumstance that he speaks.

The unfitness of essay writing as a *means* to acquiring skill in self-expression now appears. No man can write well on matters about which he has no sharp opinion. Hence it is that the essay is exclusively the instrument of a mature mind (mature at least with respect to the particular subject matter). But the undergraduate—and the learner generally—is not mature. He studies composition to attain maturity. And his embarrassment as an essayist is mightily aggravated by the fact that it is much harder to discourse lucidly on things today than in earlier generations. The world about which he must say something is immeasurably more complicated and vaster than the toy cosmos which Addison and Lamb knew. Things are now hopelessly entangled with one another. One could scarcely discourse on Roast Pig at this hour, without commenting learnedly upon carbohydrates, trichinosis, and the Meat Trust. Worse yet, the old ideals of life are all under suspicion, and the new are as vague as images on ruffled water; so that the young

writer has no philosophy, no point of view—or else—worse luck!—he has one shamelessly stolen from antiquity and badly damaged in transit.

In view of all this, the learner would advance much more swiftly, were he to describe only those affairs and people which he knows absolutely. In doing that, he would at least begin at the right place. But with what is he so marvelously intimate? Only with events which he has witnessed or conjured up in his own imagination. Only with the appearance and flow of them, be it added, and not with their import. Let him describe them as he witnesses them, interpreting them not at all. Let him report, but not explain. Then he will be at his best.<sup>1</sup>

I shall venture to say, then, that, from the points of view of educator and learner, this, the most neglected purpose, is the most important one. Writing fiction for the sake of the skill and the knowledge it brings would probably improve almost every educated man and

<sup>1</sup>It is idle to urge, against this opinion, that college fiction is immature. This oft-repeated censure is usually founded upon two unfair comparisons; first, the comparison of undergraduate works with those of veteran authors; and, secondly, a comparison of what the undergraduate has to say with what he has learned. The former contrast is foolish. The latter rests upon the mistaken assumption that the quantity of a person's information is a just measure of the number and vigor of the opinions he ought to have. So far is this notion removed from the truth that the opposite is often correct: the greater the mass of facts that are being crammed into one's head, the fewer one's thoughts, during the cramming. Undergraduate essays ought to be inferior, on the whole. As for fiction, the equitable critic will set the learner's narratives over against his essays. And he will discover the conspicuous superiority of the former. In freshness, ease, sincerity and finish, the stories appearing in the undergraduate magazines of the leading American colleges assuredly outrank the essays. This becomes doubly significant when we recall that their authors have been drilled in the composing of essays, but little or not at all in story writing.

woman. It would give new insight into literary structure. This, to be sure, is the least of its benefits; but it is not to be despised. To read a novel with new eyes; to perceive in a story something more than off-hand chatter,—surely this power is worth many times the efforts its acquisition will cost. But the advantage does not end here. With it come a quickened sense of artistic values, a more supple style, and an enlivening of the imagination. This last is, by all odds, the supreme gain. Imagination is the first and indispensable activity of thought, be it scientific or practical or artistic. While it lacks the dignity which the reasoning power enjoys in common repute, it really stands not a degree below the latter. In the affairs of life it stands one in good stead more frequently than the sterner intellectual skill does. Assign to almost any task requiring thought an imaginative man with scant logic and an unimaginative logician; nine times out of ten the former will handle it more successfully. And any psychologist can tell you why. Would it not seem wise then to train young men and women in the exercise of fancy?

Against this suggestion arises the cry that such a course leads to frivolity and flightiness. Matter-of-fact folks will assure you that people are full enough of fancies, without any encouragement from academic authorities. They will prove that only demonstrated truths enter into a sound education. But both of these propositions are fatally wrong. The first rests upon a subtle equivocation in the word 'fancy', which is identified with 'imagination' and then lends its invidious connotation to the latter term. In this sense, 'imagining' comes to mean idle dreaming or, worse yet, wild belief. Now, beyond doubt, there is altogether too much of that abroad. But it is not genuine imagining. On the contrary, it is unimaginativeness. Sometimes we call it stupidity. Some-



times it is superstition. Sometimes it is gullibility. Sometimes it is 'the artistic temperament'. But always it is one and only one thing at bottom; to wit, the absence of quick, variegated, appropriate, connected imagery. The man in whom such imagery wells up richly is the sane man, the well-balanced thinker. It supplies him with doubts, cautions, and leads. And these are the very things which the unbalanced thinker and the 'artistic temperament' lack.

In one of the soundest of his queer essays Chesterton makes an observation which bears upon this matter.

The artistic temperament is a disease that afflicts amateurs. It is a disease which arises from men not having sufficient power of expression to utter and get rid of the element of art in their being. It is healthful to every sane man to utter the art within him; it is essential to every sane man to get rid of the art within him at all costs. Artists of a large and wholesome vitality get rid of their art easily, as they breathe easily or perspire easily. But in artists of less force the thing becomes a pressure, and produces a definite pain, which is called the artistic temperament. Thus, very great artists are able to be ordinary men—men like Shakespeare or Browning. . . .

It need hardly be said that this is the real explanation of the thing which has puzzled so many dilettante critics, the problem of the extreme ordinariness of the behavior of so many great geniuses. . . . Their behavior was so ordinary that it was not recorded. . . . The modern artistic temperament cannot understand how a man who could write such lyrics as Shakespeare wrote could be as keen as Shakespeare was on business transactions in a little town in Warwickshire.<sup>1</sup>

How is it that amateurs lack this power to express the art that is in them? Have they no ideas? Indeed, they have them aplenty; they can state them readily as pure propositions, but not in full artistic narrative. Are they

<sup>1</sup>*Heretics*. Essay on the Wit of Whistler.

ignorant of words? Rarely. Can they not reason? Well enough for the purposes of art. Where then can their difficulty lie, if not in the paucity or sluggishness of their imagination? It must be that they sit hour after hour, waiting for the right word to pop up, as poor Flaubert did. And to catch up the loose threads of a plot, they have to weave and unravel almost as long as Penelope did.

The very same thing might be said of the superstitious man, the mystic and the dupe. It is the unimaginative savage who confuses his dreams with realities. It is the dull Bedouin who thinks the stalking pillar of sand that marches in the desert whirlwind is a living jinn. And it is the thick-witted peasant who believes in ghosts and patriotism and politician's promises. In the arsenal of such minds there is neither powder nor shot with which to combat any idea. They cannot see why the dead may not return in dreams, or why a thing that moves without visible impetus is not alive, or why an alderman who gives Christmas turkeys to the poor and takes off his hat to the Stars and Stripes is not a high-minded statesman.

This defect is, in large measure, an evil endowment. So too is a copious fancy a gift from some good fairy. Nevertheless, deliberate training can improve the weaker and release fresh energies of the stronger imagination. This is why the writing of fiction for self-culture is the most important of the four purposes we are here discussing.

c. *Writing for profit.* This is the commonest, the most obvious, and the most speculative of the four aims. Unlike the two purposes just considered, it imposes a variety of restrictions which some authors find exceedingly irksome and others do not. These restrictions are vital to commercial success and difficult to define. Many experienced editors are unable to phrase them intelligibly. The writer who senses them and reckons with them suc-

cessfully will make money, which is a desirable thing. But, if he remains blind to them, nothing short of genius will save him. What the restrictions are will be later discussed. At present I wish only to insist upon the much challenged fact that writing for profit is a distinct ideal, not at all incidental to some other supposedly finer one. It sets its own course and encounters its own problems.

d. *Writing for social service.* Concerning the propriety of this aim artists differ irreconcilably. Some of them insist that the only legitimate aim of painting or singing or writing is to delight somebody. Others say that the highest art is glorified preaching, and that the beauties of it are only means to the finer moral end. This latter position has been brilliantly defended by the versatile Chesterton, whom we may again quote.

Now of all, or nearly all, the able modern writers whom I have briefly studied in this book this is especially and pleasingly true, that they do each of them have a constructive and affirmative view, and that they do take it seriously and ask us to take it seriously. . . . In the *fin de siècle* atmosphere every one was crying out that literature should be free from all causes and ethical creeds. Art was to produce only exquisite workmanship, and it was especially the note of those days to demand brilliant plays and brilliant short stories. And when they got them, they got them from a couple of moralists. The best short stories were written by a man trying to preach Imperialism. The best plays were written by a man trying to preach Socialism. All the art of the artists looked tiny and tedious beside the art which was a by-product of propaganda.

The reason, indeed, is very simple. A man cannot be wise enough to be a great artist without being wise enough to wish to be a philosopher. A man cannot have the energy to produce good art without having the energy to wish to pass beyond it. . . . When we

want any art tolerably brisk and bold, we have to go to the doctrinaires.<sup>1</sup>

This is a happy exaggeration, which Chesterton would have some trouble in defending. Not every 'tolerably brisk and bold' work of art has come from a doctrinaire. *Macbeth* is surely as 'brisk and bold' as any of Mr. Shaw's polemical plays; but Shakespeare never tried to preach. Indeed, Tolstoi, Shaw, and others would have us believe that he never had an idea of his own, nor so much as a genuine, gripping conviction on any subject whatever. And all of Professor Moulton's ingenious attempts to discover in his plays a complete and lofty philosophy are but so much straw against the fire of Tolstoi's attack. Again, Poe's tales certainly ward off slumber as well as Chesterton's stories about Father Brown; yet Poe had no propaganda, and precious little moral earnestness. And so we might prolong the list of glittering exceptions.

Nevertheless, the greater truth is on Chesterton's side. More than ever before, fiction today is the moralist's weapon. More than ever before, preachers of every stripe, from Kipling to Henry Van Dyke, use it successfully. And this advance is due in no slight degree to the clearing up of fictional technique since Poe and Maupassant. It is not so very long ago that didactic novels and stories were insufferable. The moral sat behind you and whispered noisily into your ear, while you strove to follow the players and the play. This was quite the style in eighteenth-century writings, especially the French; and it was taken up by Maria Edgeworth, in whose hands it became ludicrous. As late as 1880, American magazines were still publishing stuff rankly reminiscent of that manner. But now it survives nowhere in litera-

<sup>1</sup>*Heretics*, 288, etc.

ture; to find it you must turn to Sunday School weeklies and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Writers have outgrown it, and so has the cultured public. Curiously enough, though, its disappearance has not decreased the preacher's opportunities. Rather has it widened them. It has done so, however, by increasing the technical difficulties. No longer may he insert a moral disquisition in the midst of a love scene. He must write straight drama, weaving his thesis into it so deftly that he insinuates your mind without your knowing it. If he cannot accomplish this, he fails altogether. But if he can, even imperfectly, his influence will exceed by a hundred-fold that of the old-school author-preacher.

No, the preacher's opportunities have not lessened. But the number of preachers who can seize them has. Many a high school graduate of the rising generation could grind out stories of the Maria Edgeworth stamp, but only a skilled and facile mind could produce a fiction-sermon which a good modern magazine would publish. And this brings us to a moral which will soon be dinned tediously into the learner's ears: if your purpose in writing fiction is this one, you must master the art. For the didactic story, more than any other, must sustain its dramatic interests perfectly. Ordinary art conceals itself; but the sermon-story must hide not only its art but also its moral. It calls for double magic.

3. *The relative difficulty of these aims.* The order in which we have discussed these four purposes is the order of their ease. To write merely for one's own pleasure is very simple. You may give yourself free rein. No style is too exotic, no character too weird, no plot too improbable, no theme too abstruse or too trivial to employ, *if you like it*. Many become impossible, however, as soon as you set out to write for self-culture. A thorough knowledge of good art is not to be achieved unless

you master its practices. Like the mastery of painting or music, it involves many little drudgeries, not the least irritating of which is the dissecting of famous techniques. When he becomes a professional story teller, the author's trials increase again. He must hold aloof from many fascinating themes and eschew styles, turns, and effects dear to an artist and trained critic but invisible or abhorrent to the multitude. Also he must shape his program with an eye to what other authors are doing and what the wide world is talking about. For instance, at the present moment, some editors are casting about eagerly for good stories that have to do with woman's suffrage; while others seek comedies and tragedies of the High Cost of Living. A fair piece of work on one of these themes will, by virtue of its timeliness, be preferred above a much finer story about the men and griefs of yesterday. Hence the professional author must write with his ear to the ground—which is an awkward position and not always dignified. It is neither dishonorable nor debasing; at worst, it calls for the shrewdness of a shopkeeper and for a limber mind. Most difficult of all is the didactic aim. Why it is has been indicated at the close of Section 2 and will be demonstrated elsewhere.

And now let the opening question be repeated. Why write fiction? Well, the answer rests with you; but you must choose from among these four purposes. And you must bear in mind, from first to last, that each of them sets up a distinct enterprise whose standards, methods, and limitations must be studied apart from those of the other three. Also you must know that, while the enterprises are not incompatible, success in one does not necessarily entail success in another.

4. *Shall it be the novel or the short story?* Suppose you have resolved to write fiction. The question then arises: which of the two leading prose forms shall you employ?

(For reasons soon to be shown, we need not consider the minor forms, such as the novelette, the tale, the fable, etc.) Now, the answer can be deduced from the purpose you have chosen.

a. *If you write for pleasure, choose whichever form you like.*

b. *If you write for self-culture, choose the short story.*

c. *If you write for profit, choose the short story, at least until your skill and reputation are established.*

d. *If you write for reform, choose only the novel.*

a. This rule is perfectly obvious.

b. For the writer desiring to understand literary values intimately, the short story affords opportunities vastly richer than those of the novel. And the reasons are three: (1) The student can experiment more rapidly with the short story, because of its brevity. He can write twenty stories in the time required for one novel. This repetition of the entire technique hastens learning. (2) The short story contains every artistic device employed in the novel, except high complication (such as sub-plots). Hence, in mastering story technique, the student masters the virtues of the novel. (3) The finer types of story demand many artistic qualities which the novel does not. These qualities derive chiefly from the formal restrictions that are placed upon the theme, the length, and the intricacy of the story. Brander Matthews has pointed out some requirements and effects peculiar to the highest, most difficult of short story forms, namely the pure dramatic story. What he has to say about them holds of the commoner story forms much less rigorously, but broadly enough to illustrate our present point.

First, as to the theme:

The Short-story, far more than the Novel even, demands a subject. The Short-story is nothing if there is no story to tell;—one might almost say that a Short-

story is nothing if it has no plot,— except that “plot” may suggest to some readers a complication and an elaboration which are not really needful.

Second, as to the structure:

The Short-story fulfils the three false unities of the French classic drama: it shows one action, in one place, on one day. A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation. ✓

Third, as to the artistic skill required:

No one has ever succeeded as a writer of Short-stories who had not ingenuity, originality, and compression; and most of those who have succeeded in this line had also the touch of fantasy. But there are not a few successful novelists lacking, not only in fantasy and compression, but also in ingenuity and originality; they had other qualities, no doubt, but these they had not. If an example must be given, the name of Anthony Trollope will occur to all. Fantasy was a thing he abhorred; compression he knew not; and originality and ingenuity can be conceded to him only by a strong stretch of the ordinary meaning of the words. Other qualities he had in plenty, but not these. And, not having them, he was not a writer of Short-stories. Judging from his essay on Hawthorne, one may even go so far as to say that Trollope did not know a good Short-story when he saw it.<sup>1</sup>

The short story is indeed ‘a high and difficult department of fiction.’ And, as Canby says, ‘In its capacity for perfection of structure, for nice discrimination in means and for a satisfying exposition of the full power of words, it is much superior to the novel, and can rank only below the poem.’ It will teach the student much more than the novel can about the deep virtues of restraint, clarity, directness and action. Indeed, it has come to be

<sup>1</sup> *The Philosophy of the Short-story*, 32, 16, 23, etc.



recognized as the natural approach to the novelist's craft. And history confirms this judgment, for nearly all great fictionists since the mid-nineteenth century have begun as story writers.

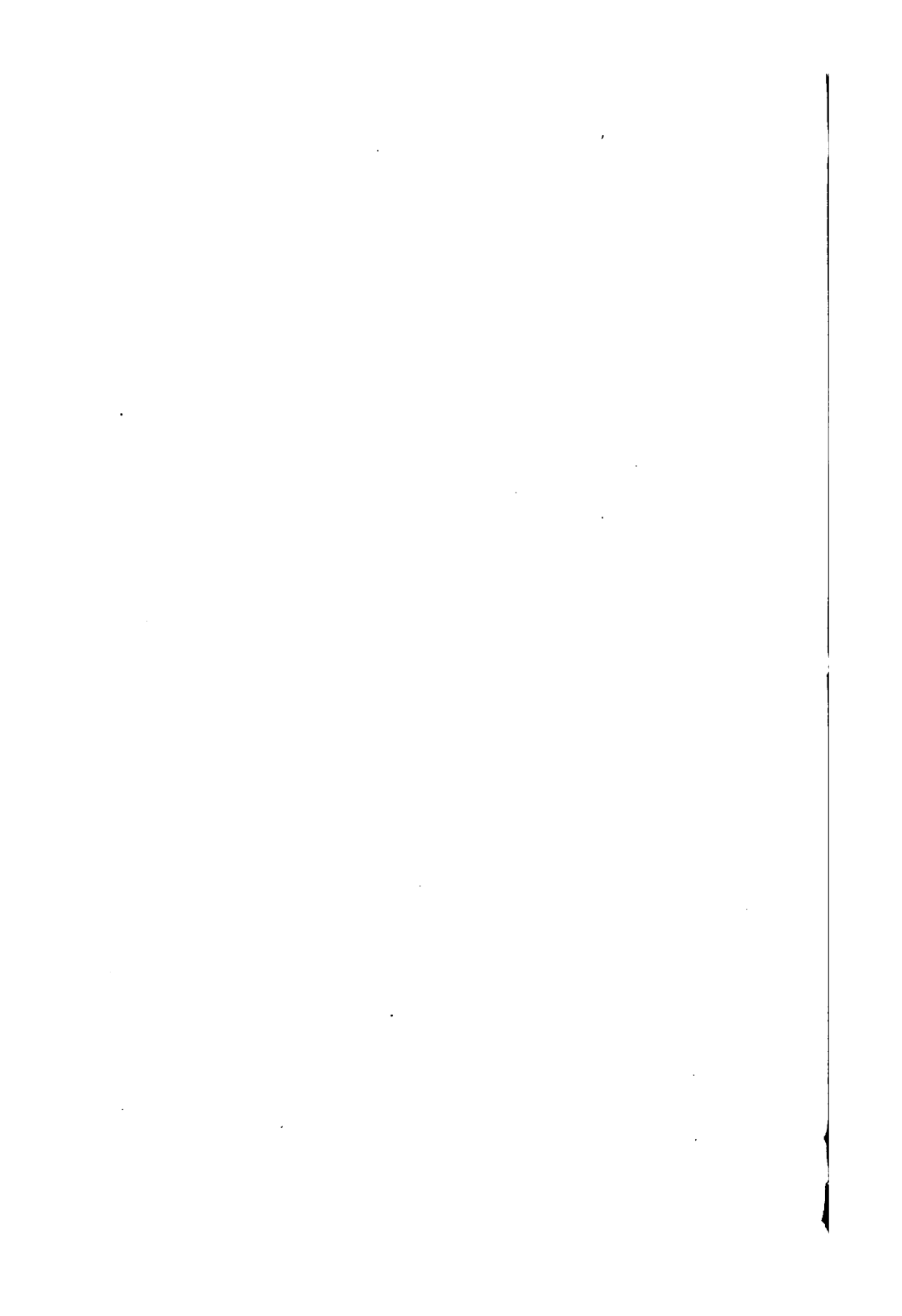
c. The short story can be turned to profit much more promptly and surely than the novel. A person who can write at all can finish a score of stories in the time required for one novel, and the chances of selling half of the twenty are much better than those of selling the novel. Furthermore, the stories will be paid for upon acceptance, or soon afterward; whereas the returns from the novel will come mostly in the form of royalties spread over a period of years. Finally, the story market is better than the novel market. Ten mediocre tales will yield more than one fair novel (unless the latter is sold first to a magazine for serial publication). And five good stories will pay more than a novel of fairly high merit may be expected to.

d. Brunetière has laid his finger upon a peculiarity of the short story which unfits it for sermonizing. He says—and correctly—that it does not deal with social problems. Its canvas is too small; or, to change the figure, it moves so rapidly that it touches only the high spots. But every problem worth preaching about must sound the deeps. It is a problem because there are two or more sides to it, because it demands hard thinking, and because many people have not thought it out. Now the author who wishes to persuade his readers, say, that socialism is the wisest course, or that divorce should be unrestricted, must develop his entire argument in dramatic form. But for this the short story has no space. At best, it can give a picture which will *suggest* the author's view. Van Dyke's recent Half-Told Tale entitled *Stronghold*<sup>1</sup> does this very prettily. It deals with the most intricate

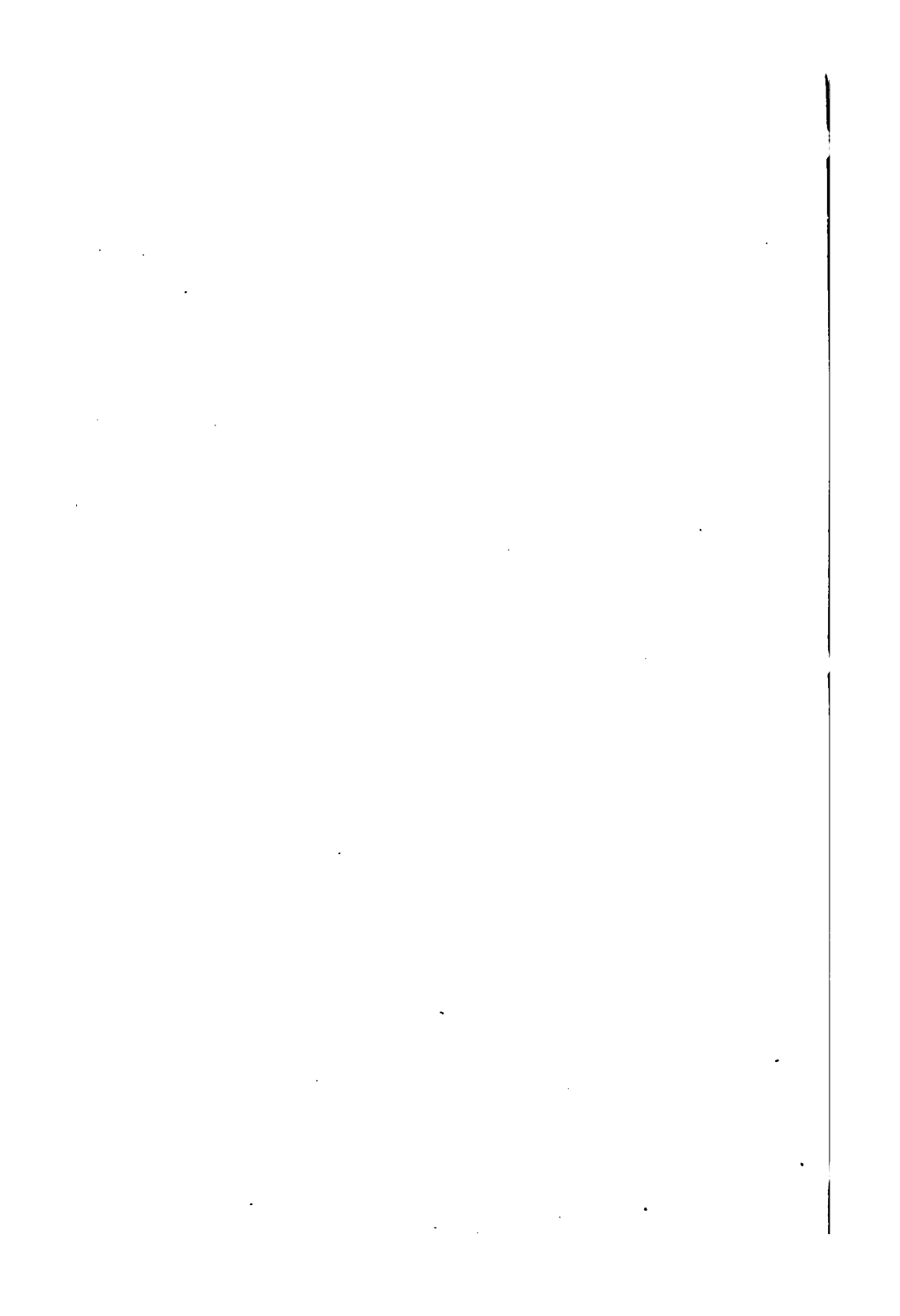
<sup>1</sup> *Scribner's*, April, 1912.

and obscure of questions, the question as to the wisdom of social violence. It moves you, it rings true, yet it does not quite convince; and no fiction short of a thick book could, having that problem to wrestle with. Just because the short story presents no more than one little scene, one idea, one *pro* or *contra*, it is an ill weapon for a man with a mission, which calls into play the heavy artillery of argument and long-drawn-out history.

5. *The purpose of this book.* Those students who write for culture should do so with the highest ideals of fictional art before them; and those who write for profit should know, in addition, all the tricks of the trade. Therefore this volume falls into two parts. Its first and more important aim is to describe the perfect story and the devices for attaining perfection. In arraying these I am well aware that not one student in a thousand can manage all of them. Even a master often fails with some. But they are, none the less, the ideals and guiding principles. In the short second half of the book the commercial aspect of authorship is considered. There we shall take exception to some of those artistic laws, but only because the reading public is less interested in perfect art than in simple entertainment. In recognizing this fact, we do not fall into any contradiction. Nor do we alter the ideals of fiction. We only admit the indisputable fact that purposes shape ideals, and that the purpose of the artist is not identical with the purpose of the entertainer. All pure art is entertaining, but not all entertaining is pure art. The demands of entertainment are broader and looser than those of flawless fiction.



## **PART I: THE ART**



## CHAPTER I—WHAT IS A SHORT STORY

1. *The double ideal.* In loose popular usage, every story that is short is a short story, and a story is any narrative. Allegory, anecdote, report and tale are regarded as so many varieties of short story. But among artists and critics there prevails a narrower conception which is amply justified by the history of modern fiction. According to them, the short story is the most highly specialized brand of narrative, if not of prose generally. Now, what quality peculiarizes it so? Its double ideal.

*The short story ideal is a fusion of two artistic ideals, the one American, the other French. Poe best expressed the former, and Maupassant the latter. The American ideal is 'The Single Effect.' The French ideal is the Dramatic Effect.*

~~THE SHORT STORY IS THEREFORE A NARRATIVE DRAMA~~ ✓  
WITH A SINGLE EFFECT.

~~2. *What the single effect is.*~~ In his essay on Hawthorne's tales, Poe points out that the 'brief tale' is not a work of art unless it produces a unified impression upon the reader.

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. As by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted

which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem, but undue length is yet more to be avoided.<sup>1</sup>

This ideal was first attained by Poe. His stories bear little or no resemblance to the tales of earlier writers. Compare, if you will, *The Fall of the House of Usher* with any of the stories in *The Arabian Nights*, and you will instantly discern the novelty of the American writer. Charming the tales of Scheherazade are, but in a different way. Whatever they do, they do not produce a single emotional effect. Within each tale the reader is transported, as on the magic carpet of Prince Houssain, from grim tragedy to farce, from farce to tedious theological disquisitions on some sura of the Koran, and thence to a page of puns or something else. He is watching literary vaudeville, and the spectacle has all the merits and defects of the theatrical article. This variegation is, of course, much more pronounced in medieval fiction than in modern; but it pervades the latter down to the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Before then, it is only in rare specimens that we find anything like the unity of impression which Poe produces.

X Insofar as technique is concerned, the single effect is more fundamental than the dramatic effect. It determines much more profoundly the structure of the short story. Furthermore, it is, one might say, an absolute ideal, whereas the dramatic is relative to the particular material of each plot. For instance, a weak dramatic quality will not ruin a story, provided some one emotion or some one idea is vividly played upon; but, conversely, there is no hope for a story, however dramatic, if it leaves

<sup>1</sup>Graham's Magazine, May, 1835.

you with either no definite impression at all or else with several in conflict or unrelated. } The majority of current productions well illustrate this rule. Few indeed are the strong dramatic stories, but there are many others—mostly character sketches, mystery tales, and surprises—which give the reader something to laugh at, something to cry over, something to rage at, or something to think about. In short, they affect him in a distinct and single manner; and it is just this unity of impression which enables them to run the editorial gantlet. There is a pretty clear reason for this, and it will appear slowly in the course of the technical analysis upon which we shall soon be launched.

3. *What dramatic narrative is.* The second constituent ideal, the French, is much less easily defined. The trouble with it is that the dramatic quality to which it aspires is somewhat nebulous. An over-simplified statement of it appears in Matthews' remark, cited above, that the short story fulfils the three false unities of the French classic drama: "It shows one action, in one place, on one day. A Short story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation." Were we to take this literally, we should find scarcely a story even approximating the standard. Look, for instance, at the more familiar works of the chief exponent of the dramatic story, Maupassant. *The Horla* has two characters dominant and two emotions, mystery and horror. There is no one event, though there is a single complication. *The Necklace*, one of the flawless *contes*, covers a period of ten years and depends absolutely upon the interplay of two emotions, false pride and honor, the former controlling the wife and the latter the husband. In like manner *Vain Beauty* scorns the false dramatic unities; and so too does every other superior *conte* with the possible



exception of *Moonlight*, and *A Coward*. Were we to inspect the stories of other authors, we should find a still less pious observance of the alleged rule.

Nevertheless, nearly all story writers since Poe show unmistakable signs of following some dramatic ideal. And the most conspicuous evidence of this is that *their stories have plots*. Herein they differ sharply from Poe's tales, few of which exhibit more than a shred of that sort of complication. If, now, we can describe the essence of a plot, we shall understand the ideal of drama. This description must now be attempted.

*A plot is a climactic series of events each of which both determines and is determined by the characters involved.*

The student will please observe that the determination here spoken of is *reciprocal*. This fact is the significant one. If the determination is one-sided, there results no plot, in the strict dramatic sense.

Thus, suppose the events shaped the destiny of the character but were not themselves directed by him; the hero would then be little more than the passive victim of circumstances, and the story would take on the loose vesture of flowing adventure, like the yarns of Sinbad, the Sailor. Sinbad, you remember, set forth on his first voyage to repair his squandered fortunes. This initial act was 'in character', for it was specifically determined by the great traveler's repentance and new desires. His plight, his bitter thoughts of prodigalities past, and his resolve to lead a saner life directly precipitated his embarking. Here then is genuine drama. But there is no more of it. All that befell him afterward was not of his making. It was pure chance that his ship came upon a dead calm near a pleasant little island, and that he went ashore. It was pure chance that the island turned out to be the back of a leviathan, and that the monster dove to the bottom of the sea, ere his visitors regained their sloop. It was pure

chance that Sinbad, afloat on a fragment of wreckage, was driven by a rising gale to an island, and that the grooms of the maharajah, who rescued him, were still near by, pasturing the royal stud. And so forever his haps and mishaps ran on, beyond the control of his wishes and skill, indifferent to his virtues.

Now, a skilful writer might weave such adventures so deftly that they would hang together like a well-fashioned garment. But mere coherence would not elevate them to the texture of a drama. At best, it could only achieve that other virtue of the story, namely the single effect. To Poe this result seemed quite enough. Indeed, he believed it constituted a plot. In his essay on American drama he says:

A mere succession of incidents, even the most spirited, will no more constitute a plot than a multiplication of zeros, even the most infinite, will result in the production of a unit. This all will admit—but few trouble themselves to think further. The common notion seems to be in favor of mere *complexity*; but a plot, properly understood, is perfect only inasmuch as we shall find ourselves unable to detach from it or *disarrange* any single incident involved, without *destruction* to the mass. This we say is the point of perfection—a point never yet attained, but not on that account unattainable. Practically, we may consider a plot as of high excellence when no one of its component parts shall be susceptible of *removal* without *detriment* to the whole.

Now, this describes a feature of the perfect drama; but the trouble is that it does the same for the mystery story like *The Gold Bug* and for the well-constructed allegory and, in general, for any narrative which aims to bring out one idea or to lead up to one important scene. Indeed, what Poe here touches is not the *nature* of a plot but a *virtue* of well-knit discourse. His remarks apply

perfectly to the 'plot' of a geometrical demonstration or any other deductive argument.

Let us now make the opposite supposition; namely, that we have a plot when we have fashioned a series of events that grow entirely out of the central character. This is W. D. Howells' belief. About it we may ask several questions. First, do many writers accept it as a dramatic ideal? Secondly, do they live up to it in their own writings? Thirdly, does it help define the class of existent fiction which critics recognize to be short stories? And, if not, why not?

The first query finds an affirmative answer. Maupassant, Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton and many others strive to compose stories in which the heroes and heroines make everything happen out of their own inner natures. But—touching now the second question—these authors constantly allow their characters to be moulded by circumstances. Assuredly their men and women grow, shift, decay, and take on new forms under the stress of chance. If they are selfish at the outset, they end generously. If they begin honest, they finish as hypocrites.

In Howells' *The Magic of a Voice*, for example, the entire plot turns upon Langbourne's lucky discovery of the circular letter and the still luckier presence of Barbara's home address on the envelope. How then can Howells here defend his own dictum that in a true plot "the man does not result from the things he does, but the things he does result from the man"? It might be said that Langbourne's going into the girl's room at the hotel after she had vacated it grew out of his character; and, as he found the letter on the floor of the room, this latter event sprang from his character. But this reasoning is sophistical. It is a variety of the 'fallacy of accident', as logicians say. For it was not Langbourne's wish to find the lost article

that set the story going; it was the actual discovery of it. Now, the wish and the ensuing act came from his character, no doubt. But the presence of the circular did not. It was as accidental as the direction of the wind outside the hotel. So far as his passionate curiosity about the girl was concerned, he might have found nothing in her room.

But we need not insist too zealously upon this distinction. For the issue does not turn upon anybody's notion of what a plot is, but rather upon what is dramatic in a plot. What we vaguely call plot and discern in the modern short story is the dramatic quality, and it is only because we hope to discover it in plots that we analyze the latter. Now Howells may be right insofar as he means that the reader's *interest* always centres upon the hero's ingenuity and daring in getting the better of circumstances, or upon his cowardice or villainy or dulness or, in general, upon his way of managing affairs. But this managing is only one of two indispensable factors in drama. Pure, abstract character, however triumphant and glorious, cannot spin drama out of itself. A merchant dictating a business letter to a docile and competent stenographer is making things happen according to his own will and nature. But the act is not dramatic. A citizen refusing to buy a red cravat because his wife dislikes the hue is displaying character. But the deed, unqualified by certain unforeseen, uncontrolled complications and consequences, is not dramatic. It could not be told appropriately in a short story unless it drove the ~~uxorious~~ hero into a fatal quarrel with a haberdashing desperado, or led his wife to despise him for his softness and to run away from him. In other words, there must be a climax, an event remarkable in some respect; and something must happen to the character as a result of something which he has done; and, as

Howells wishes, the character must express himself in the episodes.

In other words, every story whose excellence is generally admitted is more than a picture of character, more than a good complication, more than a fragment of biography, and more than an exciting episode. *It is all these together*, and in it they are so arranged that the reader is *surprised* by what happens to the hero, and *thrilled* by what the hero does to each situation. This thrill is the thrill of drama, only if the hero somehow exhibits his human nature *by conduct in a crisis*. There may be as many dramatic qualities as there are traits of human nature and typical crises; between the blackest, unrelieved tragedy and the frothiest farce the spectrum is long. But all the shades in it have this common characteristic, namely, *conduct in a crisis*. And this is the second constituent ideal of the modern short story, the ideal fostered in France and now generally accepted. We shall soon have much to say about its peculiarities.

4. *What the single effect involves.*

We have now to ask whether the first ideal demands any special structure or material. It does not. It may be gained in a variety of ways, the two basic types of which are:

a. Building the story around a theme.

b. Emphasizing one or more of the three factors in the dramatic narrative.

a. *Thematic development.* The theme can best be described in contrast with the plot and the setting, with which it blends so deftly in the finished work that the casual reader seldom distinguishes them. The term 'theme', is widely employed in two senses. Its commoner meaning is 'a topic, a subject of discourse'. So used, it leads us to say, for example, that the fatal panic of Viscount de Signoles is the theme of Maupassant's little masterpiece, *A Coward*; and that the softening of

the Abbé Marignan's heart toward beauty and love is the theme of *Moonlight*. Over against this connotation stands the more technical one, which is the 'underlying idea'. The looser first meaning is little more than a rough indication of the dramatic narrative as a whole; it tells what happens. But the second meaning is the *import* of what happens. *It is the idea of which the narrative is the dramatic expression*. It bears the same relation to the narrative that the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony bear to the world of melody which follows them. Out of this short *motif* the entire symphony grows; it expresses the full esthetic value of the simple combination. So too with the thematic story; it dramatically amplifies a proposition. Often it really is, and always it has at least the air of being, an empirical proof of the proposition. The writer's interest centres upon the law or other truth, not upon the persons or episodes of the story. He tells the story for the sake of the truth it drives home, rather than for the poignancy or humor or sweetness of its happenings.

Consider O. Henry's powerful, somewhat freakishly constructed romance, *A Municipal Report*. O. Henry undertakes to show that Frank Norris didn't know what he was talking about when he wrote: "Fancy a novel about Chicago or Buffalo, let us say, or Nashville, Tennessee! There are just three big cities in the United States which are 'story cities'—New York, of course, New Orleans, and, best of all, San Francisco." O. Henry knew this was libellous nonsense. He knew the world too well to be deceived into thinking that times and places give life and color to the deeds of mankind. "It is a rash one", he protested, "who will lay his finger on the map and say: 'In this town there can be no romance—what could happen here?'" And by way of proof he wrote about

Azalea Adair, of eight-sixty-one Jessamine Street, Nashville; and he demolished Norris' juvenile dictum.

The theme of *A Municipal Report* is: 'Romance is the slave of neither times nor places.' The plot is the dramatic instance illustrating this proposition. It is the climactic series of happening which exhibits the general law asserted in the theme. Now, just as in a natural science, so too in the fictionist's domain; any one of an infinite multitude of events suffices to demonstrate a law. Any star in the sky, any pebble under foot, any falling apple establishes the principle of gravitation. Likewise, to have affirmed his theme, O. Henry might have cited the strange adventures of Amy Smith, of Scranton, Pa.; or what befell Count Vaurien, the spy of Napoleon; or the trouble that descended upon Herr Spitz, collector of the port of Munich; or the deeds of Uk-Tuk, chief of the Mu-ri, in the forgotten days of the Stone Hammer. Again, to prove that Romance laughs at geographers, he might have played upon innumerable complications, now of French folly, now of big business in Bolivia, now of racial rows in Russia, now of rate wars in ancient Rome. And with this theme, so with nearly all others. Each may be adequately exhibited in any one of an innumerable host of plots. And this fact marks one of the differences between theme and plot.

A similar contrast may be drawn between plot and setting. Given one set of people displaying opinions and desires which bring about the dramatic complication, and you may vary the geographical details with considerable freedom. Not every change in these brings with it a modification of the dramatic quality, still less of the theme. A brave fireman will rescue a cripple from a burning building, be the building a soap factory or a Methodist church, be it in Shanghai or Kalamazoo. There are thus two degrees of elasticity in the handling

of a theme: first, the theme may be depicted in many plots; and, secondly, each plot may be developed in many settings.<sup>1</sup>

It must now be evident that the thematic story resembles the didactic. And we must designate their relation closely.

*The thematic story differs from the didactic, not in the nature of its theme nor in the clearness of the dramatic proof of the theme, but in the single effect produced.*

*In the thematic story the dramatic narrative is stronger than the pure theme. In the didactic story the pure theme is stronger than the dramatic narrative.*

The adjective, 'stronger', here means 'stronger in effect'. It does not mean more significant or more moral; it refers only to the superior intensity of the reader's impression. Were a critic to classify stories exclusively with respect to their material, he could discern no difference between the types we have just distinguished. Exactly the same themes and the identical characters, complications, and setting may be made to yield either variety.

Suppose you were to write about the sinking of the *Titanic* and wished to show that heroism is not a rare and difficult act which only a few men of tremendous will power and lofty ideals can perform, but is, on the contrary, a common, natural, and easy deed. You might tell the whole story without mentioning this theme, even indirectly. There might be no more than a picture of the little bell boys, puffing cigarettes in the dining room, while the stricken vessel slowly tilted on end; or of

<sup>1</sup> The contrast between plot and setting may suggest that these factors are generically different. This would be a serious confusion. The setting is a part of the plot: It is, however, a peculiar part in that it is essential and yet not very influential in coloring the dramatic factors.



the stokers standing knee-deep in icy water; or of the travelers playing poker in the smoking room until the cards slipped off the tipping table. And yet the reader would carry away the theme as surely as if you had bellowed it text-wise into his ears; and the story would be thematic. On the other hand, you might begin with the remark that men are wont to think of heroes as towering, solitary figures, but that this is false. Then you might tell your story, arranging the incidents solely with an eye to the proof. In so doing, you would perhaps suppress much that might have heightened the dramatic effect. You might drop into colorless reporting, with the result that, through it all, your reader would not be absorbed in the episodes but would be thinking of what you sought to establish. Or else the story might run along smoothly without this effect up to the very close; and there its climax might be so weak that the reader would slip instantly from it to the theme. In this case your story would be didactic.

Many stories, namely, those whose themes are not perceptibly stronger nor weaker than their dramatic development, cannot be classified under either head, except by some arbitrary ruling. There is little doubt that Hawthorne intended *The Birthmark* to be didactic, yet, to many readers, the moral goes lost behind the tragedy of Aylmer and Georgiana. Poe, on the other hand, probably had no desire to preach when he wrote *William Wilson*; but this story may readily be experienced as a fictional sermon; for the drama in it is not terrific, while the theme is crystal-clear. Again, O. Henry's stories frequently purport to be didactic, in a light-hearted way, but almost always the whimsical drama gets the better of the preacher; and the reader is left wondering whether the yarn was spun for the sake of the moral, or the moral for the yarn.

The single effect of the didactic story is likely to be sharp but not emotional. Its natural quality is intellectual. It is therefore a difficult species, and most attempts at it fail miserably. The stories which succeed in influencing the public most strongly are not the didactic but most often the thematic. And anybody who has tried to write both kinds knows why this is so; it is because dramatic narrative is most easily managed when one's attention is concentrated upon the drama itself, and further because most well told tales display their own moral unaided. The more you try to help a story preach, the more help it needs.

b. *Emphatic development.* Every narrative contains, ~~three~~ <sup>three</sup> basic factors which enter, in widely varying degrees, into the structure and qualify the total impression. They are:

- i. *Character.*
- ii. *Complication.*
- iii. *Setting.*

i. *Character.* There cannot be a dramatic situation without human beings. The only apparent exception is the story with an animal hero. But even here it is a human trait which is read into the creature and made to sustain the narrative.

ii. *Complication.* This includes the entanglements of persons and circumstances which make the plot. The villain's designs against the poor working girl, the old man's discovery that his son has betrayed him, the love of two men for the same girl, the rumor of hidden treasure that sends buccaneers racing across the brine,—these are meagre samples of the limitless congregation of complicating factors.

iii. *Setting.* Broadly speaking, the place where the plot unfolds is the story's setting; and all the furniture of the place belongs thereunto. The hilltop on which

X the beacon fires are lighted, the vale where the conspirators meet at midnight, the battered oaken chest that holds the ciphered will of the dead duke—of such stuff, geographical and otherwise, are settings made.

Now, each 'story germ' (that is, the vague outline of the central complication) may assume a variety of forms, each the outgrowth of some slight change in the action or characters or situation. Furthermore, one variation demands a peculiarly rich development of some character trait, while another stresses the mystery or the horror or the charm of the plot, and a third comes to its own only if the environment is minutely drawn.

*These three directions of emphasis result in three fundamental types of story. The single effect is produced, now in character drawing, now in the dramatic intensity of the plot, and now in the sensuous quality of the setting. And the resulting types are commonly called, respectively,*

1. *The character story.*
2. *The complication story.*
3. *The atmosphere story.*

These are the fundamental types, but not the only ones. Some plots not only allow but even necessitate the intensification of some two of the three factors, and some few call for the almost equal development of all three. Hence four more types, all compound, are possible:

4. *The character-complication story.*
5. *The character-atmosphere story.*
6. *The complication-atmosphere story.*
7. *The three-phase story.*

Two warnings must at once be issued to the student. The first is that he must not suppose intensification of one factor to involve the total suppression of the others. A character story is by no means one without plot and atmosphere; that would be no genuine story at all, but

only a character sketch or an anecdote. You will find these two types illustrated in Galsworthy's volume, *A Motley*; the bitter little draught of life called *Once More* is a model character story, while *A Portrait* is a character sketch. And now the second warning: the seven types above are not so many ideals toward which any given theme or plot might be driven, as the writer chooses. They are different forms which particular themes and plots impose upon the well modelled story. You cannot shape a complete plot or theme, now into the mold of a character story, now into that of an atmosphere story, as your fancy pleases. The mature cast of a story lies largely predestined in the plot or theme. There is, to be sure, a considerable elasticity of detail in its outworking and on rare occasions enough to make it eligible to either of two forms. Atmosphere, for example, can often be intensified to suit one's taste. Nevertheless, the rule holds broadly, as the student will learn by analyzing two extreme specimens, such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and O. Henry's *The Furnished Room*.

Here are two ghost stories as far apart as the poles in every detail and in every essential, except that both touch the cold hem of the supernatural. *The Turn of the Screw* is a three-phase story. The governess's loyalty, daring and love shape the course of events dramatically—and there you have a character story. The mysterious power which the two evil spirits exercise over the unhappy children, and the strange trickeries of the children, and the incomprehensible deaths of former employees at Bly all make it a story of terrific complication. And, finally, the awful spectres, the face at the window, the visions across the lake, the encounters on the stairs—all these are as sudden gusts out of a deep, black cave, freezing cold; they sweep through the whole story—and

there you have the intensely sensuous development of the setting which makes an atmosphere story. *The Furnished Room*, on the other hand, is a simple complication story, enriched with many a touch of atmosphere, but not deriving its strength from such. The ghost is very different from the unspeakable Quint in James' story. Only a whiff of perfume, nothing more! Such a very sweet, insubstantial spectre, and so shy withal, that you quite forget her in the midst of the simple pathos of the complication.

Now let the student try to think of James developing his plot as a simple complication story with the strong but accessory tinges of atmosphere such as *The Furnished Room* exhibits. The utter impossibility appears in a minute. James would have to throw away half his *idea*, to do that. The vital part played by the governess would go by the board; and with it would go the soul of the story, for the whole tragedy is born of her stubborn will. And now reverse the problem; attempt to expand the other story into a three-phase one. It cannot be accomplished, inasmuch as there is nothing for either lover to do, by force of character; no crisis to fight through, no enemies to overcome, no moral issue to settle, but only the pathetic little coincidence of the boy's chancing upon the very room where his lost sweetheart had just died, and then the unearthly whiff of mignonette. *That* is the story!<sup>1</sup>

5. *Final classification of story types.* The foregoing analysis discloses two species of stories, each of which is

<sup>1</sup>This whole question has nothing to do with that of an author's style. We are not asking whether O. Henry could have written Henry James' story, and James contrived O. Henry's. Nor are we asking whether James would have changed O. Henry's plot, had he chosen it. Our question has to do with structural possibilities of the story material. These are much deeper than individual tastes and styles.

distinguished by the direction in which its single effect arises. The following scheme orders them and their minor varieties:

<i>The Short Story</i>	{	<i>Thematic</i>
		Variation: <i>Didactic.</i>
		<i>Emphatic:</i>
		3 pure sub-types:
		<i>Character.</i>
		<i>Complication.</i>
		<i>Atmosphere.</i>
		4 complex variations:
		<i>combinations of the above 3.</i>

These distinctions, of course, are much clearer in this table than in real life. The two main species especially often blur before the reader's eyes; but this is due to a peculiarity of the human mind, not to a flaw in our analysis. The difference between the thematic and the emphatic story is as great as the difference between proving that all men are liars and saying so vehemently. But it is no greater. Genuine in reason, it often dwindles to the vanishing point in practice, thanks to the fact that most people cannot easily hold proof apart from emphasis. You may persuade them occasionally with rigorous demonstration, but most often by uttering your point many, many times with polite fervor and a pleasing variety of phrase. This is the device of old-fashioned politics, new-fashioned advertising, agreeable conversation, and much excellent instructive fiction. The vivid picture becomes the proved theme. Hence the well written emphatic story is with difficulty marked off from the genuine thematic story. But this fact does not reduce the two types to one; it only hides their profound difference.

6. *How other forms of brief fiction differ from the short story.* Our definition demarcates the short story quite

sharply, and yet without limiting the type mechanically, as all other definitions of it do. (1) The anecdote, episode, report, sketch, and tale need not be dramatic and need not produce a single effect. Thus they are doubly distinguished from the short story. (2) The novelette is better, if dramatic; but it is under no compulsion to be so. And likewise with its unity of impression. (3) The allegory, the fable, and the puzzle story need not be dramatic, but they must produce the single effect. For the purpose of the allegory is to depict an analogy, and so the analogical effect must be supreme and undisturbed. The aim of the fable is to point a moral. And the ideal of the puzzle story (such as Poe's *Gold Bug* or the ordinary detective story) is, forsooth, to puzzle you; and it would fail were it to turn you from the mystery to the beauty of the characters, to some doctrinal issue or to the charm of the diction. (4) The one-act play must, of course, be dramatic; and it is more successful, if it produces a single effect. But it is not narrative; and so, even when it produces a single effect, the latter is not literary but theatrical and demands staging and acting to bring out its proper values. Nevertheless, the one-act play is the next of kin to the short story; for it differs from the latter less in its ideals and purposes than in its medium of expression.

*Illustrations.* (1) Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* is commonly counted with the short stories. But this is a mistake. It possesses no quality of the species, but only some external, mechanical, and largely accidental features. It has one central character, it turns around one predominating incident, it is fantastic, and the number of its words falls within the orthodox limit set by the business managers of our magazines. But with these non-essentials its likeness to the type ends. There is not a trace of

dramatic action in it, though the opportunities for it are many. The tale falls into three parts; the first depicting Rip's character and his family troubles; the second telling of his encounter with Hendrick Hudson and his crew; and the third recounting the adventures that followed Rip's long sleep. Now, in none of these is it the amiable old loafer's character (or lack of character, if you will) that shapes the course of events. The nearest approach to such dramatic knitting is made in that moment when Rip, smarting under the tongue-lashings of Dame Van Winkle, slunk off with dog and gun into the peace of the woods. But did he resolve to wander far, or to lose himself, or to stay away until after night-fall? No. He "unconsciously scrambled to one of the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains." *Unconsciously!* With that word the very thought of drama vanishes. Rip simply blundered forth upon an adventure, as Sinbad the Sailor did. And so forth to the end, always a care-free victim of circumstances.

Look now to the impression created. Can you say that it is single? I, for one, cannot. On the contrary one of the most precious charms of the tale is its exquisite modulation. Few specimens of brief fiction can match the almost musical quality of its transitions from one emotional key to another. It melts from pastoral to comic, from comic to weird, from weird to pathetic, from pathetic to placid, always with grace and smoothness. And when the last word has been read, one listener may dwell upon Dame Van Winkle's temper, another may linger over the ghostly bowlers, a third laugh at Rip, and a fourth marvel at the twenty-year slumber. Ask for the one idea, the single sentiment which the tale embodies, and none can say. In this uncertainty we find the final proof that it is a tale and not a short story.



(2) *The Aspern Papers*, by Henry James, is a typical novelette. It verges toward the novel in length, in the multiplicity of its interests, and in the fulness of its delineations. As we shall soon see, the short story cannot develop more than one character trait, without marring its single effect (either by becoming too long or else arousing interest in several conflicting sides of the hero's nature). But, in *The Aspern Papers*, at least five character traits are quite elaborately pictured and these reside not in one person, but in three, each of whom alternately claims our full interest, if not our sympathies. In short, the situation resembles real life much more than that of any short story can hope to. It is intricate, and we, its spectators, are not held by some single theme or interest so much as by the battle of many natures and aspirations. Loyalty to a long-dead lover, hatred of publicity in private matters, a belated affection, family pride, and the collector's mania struggle, now desperately, now comically, with one another; and the reader sees the minutest details of their encounters. All of which is plainly impossible in a short story.

(3) The allegory, the fable, and the puzzle story are so obviously unrestricted by dramatic considerations that no analysis of specimens is called for here. The first two types commonly do nothing more than dress up a single incident, regardless of character and complication. Only that much is developed which is demanded for illustrating the moral or sharpening the simile. Read any of Æsop's fables or the parables of the New Testament; and you will find this true.

The puzzle story is frequently overlaid with at least the semblance of dramatic action; and, when it is, it is not easily held apart from the genuine short story. Not a few excellent detective stories present this difficulty.

*The Purloined Letter*, by Poe, does so; the court intrigue out of which the theft grows is thoroughly dramatic, and Poe plays on it cleverly throughout the opening movement. The minister D——, ambitious to gain control over an illustrious personage, chances to see a compromising letter on the illustrious personage's table, and steals it. Here is a situation which might naturally work out through the characters in it. The casual reader, sensing this, may fancy he has a dramatic story before him. But he has not. For this potentially dramatic situation has nothing to do with Dupin's discovery of the letter. It is the minister's diabolical *ingenuity* that generates the mystery; he hides the letter where the shrewdest detectives cannot find it. It is not his *ambition*, still less his dramatic relation to the illustrious personage, that counts in the central problem of the story.

But *The Purloined Letter*—and with it many mystery stories—does fulfil the American ideal pretty well. It produces a single effect. As this was all that Poe sought, it would be absurd to say the work is imperfect. One might as well say that a street sign is imperfect because it does not possess the qualities of a public oration.

(4) Kipling, Howells and Anthony Hope show us how close the one-act play is to the short story. *The Dolly Dialogues* often leave you in doubt as to whether you are reading drama or story. *The Hill of Illusion*, by Kipling, on the other hand, though neither drama nor story, is a thing between. And many curtain raisers might be put straight over into prose and sold to magazines. All of which shows that the only decisive difference between the species is in the form of presentation. The one-act play must be all action, all obvious, and all visible to the dullest eye. But not so with the short story; it may be full of contemplations, talk, and mean-

ings that hide between the lines. Hence, while every one-act play may be translated into a story without mutilation, not every story can be dramatized without important changes of detail.

7. *The short story cannot be defined in terms of its specific material nor by its mechanical form.* Many attempts have been made to designate the constituent stuff and the irreducible pattern of the short story. But all of them come to grief. For the short story, as we have seen, is intrinsically an *effect*; and, being such, that which produces it is infinitely various, even as with all other effects. If you wish to produce a bright red light you may do so with this or that chemical; or you may use electricity; or you may generate a white light and surround it with red glass or red celluloid or any of a thousand other things. It happens, of course, that some of these devices are much cheaper and simpler than others; and so, using them exclusively, we come to regard them as the only ones in existence. But this belief is a pragmatic fiction. So too is the usual recipe for the short story.

One of the most accurate of this sort is Esenwein's,<sup>1</sup> which sums up all previous formulas. The short story, according to him, "is marked by seven characteristics: 1. A single predominating character; 2. a single preeminent incident; 3. imagination; 4. plot; 5. compression; 6. organization; and 7. unity of impression." Now, the first three of these designate the *content* of the story (imagination here means fantasy). And it is not difficult to observe that none of them is absolutely needed. Not even in stories which aim exclusively at the single effect do we regularly find either the single predominant character or the single preeminent incident. To recur to the ever-illuminating Poe, *William Wilson* has two

<sup>1</sup> *Writing the Short Story*, 30.

equally important characters and *no* central incident. *The Pit and the Pendulum* has the single character, but again there is no one event that stands out above all others—unless you call the whole series of tortures in the pit one happening! (Once permit that trick of counting, however, and all distinctions evaporate.) Turn now to dramatic stories. Kipling's *Beyond the Pale* contains two lovers, of whom one might say, only after much sharp reasoning, that the poor little Bisesa is dramatically the more important. There is a climax—and a terrible one—but is it the 'predominating incident' or is Trejago's mad love-making that?

As for imagination, there is not the slightest reason why a perfect story might not be fashioned from pure facts. Perhaps things never happened as Kipling narrates in *Beyond the Pale*, or in that masterpiece, *Without Benefit of Clergy*; but they might have, even down to the minutest item. And, because they might have, we must say that imagination is not *essential*. At most, it is *commonly invoked*. Some authors, however, pride themselves upon using nothing but facts or the essence of fact; and in their stories you will find seldom a trace of fancy. There is none of it in Howells' *The Pursuit of the Piano*. There is none of it in James' penetrating character-drama, *The Liar*. And there is none of it in Mrs. Wharton's marvelous horror, *Ethan Frome*. Indeed, few good stories of recent years reveal complications and turns of character that might not have been found in some morning's newspaper. ✓

Most good short stories have, to be sure, only one central character, one crucial incident, and at least a light touch of fancy. It is not strange, therefore, that these are usually thought to be intrinsic structures. Nevertheless they are not. They are only *common consequences of the double ideal*. Other things being equal, a short

story is no finer for having them. But usually it is *easier* to create a fine story by so limiting your material and by drawing upon your fantasies. Recall the double ideal, a narrative drama with single effect. Now, the drama calls for characters and incidents; but to produce with these a single effect, you must often reduce them to their lowest terms. As we shall see more fully in another chapter, human nature in its real forms presents so many opposing tendencies and shifts so complexly from moment to moment that you will seldom be allowed to depict it in its natural fulness and plasticity. The single effect comes not from it, but rather from each of its single constituent appetites, impulses, prejudices, and habits. Hence your story will tend to portray not a *character* but a *trait*. Likewise with events. They, too, are likely to be intricate, and the impression they set up manifold and mixed. This is true of each episode individually, and doubly true of a series. In real life the number of unequivocal happenings is astoundingly small. Even a woodshed afire will fill one spectator with dread, another with the joy of excitement, and a third with pity for the owner; and it may even send one spectator around the circuit of these three emotions. If the reader will once more reflect upon *Rip Van Winkle*, he will see how episodes may hang together pleasantly and still induce a variety of moods. He will learn, too, why the story whose aim is to produce only one effect is prone to play around only one incident. And, finally, he will see why the writer must so frequently draw upon his imagination. The materials of real life must often be extensively tampered with; some of them cast out altogether, and pure inventions inserted, to the end that the whole may work but one witchery. Nevertheless, the single character, the single episode, and the touch of fancy are only incidental re-

straints. Their inevitability in some stories does not make them vital to the *genre*.

There remain two alleged characteristics which must be discarded. These are compression and organization. The former is only one phase of the unity of impression; the latter is indistinguishable from the plot. As Poe pointed out, when contrasting the tale with the novel, "simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity of impression".<sup>1</sup> Hence the well modelled short story must admit of being read easily at a single sitting. Now, if the plot is intrinsically simple and swift, no compression is demanded. The story may be fully told in well under ten thousand words. To say that it is compressed simply because it is short in comparison with *Vanity Fair* would be about as sensible as to say that a man is compressed into a body much smaller than an elephant's. If the word means anything, compressing means packing something *into less space than it naturally occupies*. But the natural telling of any plot suited to the short story will not exceed the proper bounds.

I should not insist upon this verbal nicety, had the laxer usage not misled many young writers into stripping their stories of every word which did not help to convey the bald *meaning* of the plot. Many high authorities have taught the writer to strike from his pages every phrase which is not absolutely indispensable to conveying his idea. It is quite in style to hold up the parables of the New Testament—and Biblical narrative generally—as models for the short story writer, and not even writers on story technique have raised voice against the custom. But protests must be made, for all such advice is deadly. It rests upon the fatal, all too easy confusion of *rhetorical compression* with the *suppression of irrelevant matter*.

<sup>1</sup>Loc. cit.

The difference between these two operations may be illumined by a homely analogy. Consider a farmer baling hay. Now, in what does his act consist, if not simply in making a dozen wisps lie where only one lay? The hay he does not change at all, save in bulk. Baled, it is still the same timothy as before in the far-flung wind-rows. Still, too, is it peppered, perhaps, with burrs and thistles. But now let us suppose that the farmer, instead of baling for market, wishes to keep his hay in the mow for his own cattle, which love not at all the burr and the thistle. He picks out these weeds, for they do not fit in with either his idea or his cows' idea of pure food. They are, in short, quite irrelevant to all the purposes of normal bovine digestion. Therefore, to suit these purposes, the farmer alters the hay. He casts out his weeds.

So with the story writer. Having penned an episode, he may endeavor to pack it into smaller compass, not by casting out anything of the plot, the setting, the character, or the interpretation; but solely by reducing the verbal bulk. Thus, instead of 'the golden orb of day', he writes 'the sun'; and he cancels a score of relative pronouns and definite articles. On the other hand, he may discern something in the story idea and its outworking which the ideals of dramatic narrative do not demand or cannot tolerate. And now he does not condense; he transforms. He does not pack the old plot into smaller space nor sketch the hero with fewer strokes. He removes dramatic factors, inserts others, clarifies the depicted traits of human nature, intensifies the climax, and so on. And all this, I insist pedantically, is not compression at all, but rather suppression. And failure to hold the two operations clearly apart has precipitated many a beginning writer into disastrous errors.

The gravest of these errors I have alluded to; it is that of supposing that fine dramatic effects are to be produced

by paring one's narrative language down until it becomes the baldest possible report of the story facts. If only I could use as few words as there are in the parable of the prodigal son—so thinks the beginner—how swift and how intense my dramatic action would be! Driven by this thought, he often abbreviates the *expression* of his idea or else cuts out minor descriptive touches. The outcome is a meagre report, excellent newspaper writing perhaps, but not dramatic narrative with a single effect. Like its false models, the Scriptural fables, it may score a point vividly, it may state an incident with fine accuracy, and yet be as far removed from the short story as the sonnet is. And the reason, more formally worded, is simply this: compression is a purely rhetorical operation, affecting only the way the story is communicated to the reader; but the story which is communicated is no more affected by that operation than it is by being translated from English to French. Its dramatic value and the single effect would remain virtually constant throughout a thousand widely different phrasings of the narrative. To produce that supreme effect of swift straightforwardness which most of us find in Maupassant and a score of later authors, you must manipulate, not words, but the people and the events about which you are writing. Character traits must be sharply isolated, circumstances ridden of obscurity and elaboration, and the complication rushed to its dramatic finish. In short, the matter of the story must be *simple*; and, being simple, it need not be compressed at all.

When a story needs compression, you may be sure of one of two things: either the writer has not been telling his story, but has been ambling far afield; or else his plot is not a story plot, but of a complexity that calls for treatment in the form of a novelette or novel. Of course, if you choose to count such mistakes as short stories, then



you may say that many short stories demand compression. But that would be queer logic. Compression, in this sense, is not a *characteristic* of the short story, but an improvement of a botched specimen.

As for the other alleged characteristic, namely, organization, what is it if not the relation of person to person and of event to event in just that manner which generates a dramatic complication and leads to a climax? But all this is what we mean by the plot. The more closely we study the latter, the clearer does it become that *even the minor arrangements of dramatic material are all fixed by it and by the exigencies of the single effect*. Whether the lady shall enter before or after her lover has finished reading the fatal letter; whether the wicked millionaire shall trust his valet or not; whether the queen shall be eating bread and honey in the parlor or in the kitchen—all such questions have to do solely with the dramatic entanglement and the unified impression. Apart from them there is no organizing to be done.

X ~~In conclusion, then,~~ contrary to all the literary formalists, a short story may have as many characters in action as the writer can handle, while producing his single effect. It may involve as many events as he is disposed to incorporate, provided only he lives up to the double ideal. And there is no style forbidden him, so long as he uses it to aid rather than to thwart that same ideal. In spite of this freedom, he will generally deal with one only trait and one episode. But let him not mistake these common formal limits for his ideal. Such a confusion is fatal, wherever ideals are involved. In morals, it leads to conventionality. And it reduces art to crass mechanics.

## EXERCISES

Which of the following works are (1) dramatic but without a unity of impression, (2) undramatic but with the single effect, (3) both dramatic and with the single effect, and (4) lacking both qualities? Indicate, as precisely as you can, the central idea and the emotional quality of each story.

Poe, E. P.—*Hop Frog*.

Balzac, Honoré—*A Seashore Drama*.

—*La Grande Bretèche*.

Maupassant, Guy de—*The Piece of String*.

—*Little Soldier*.

Coppeé, François—*The Substitute*.

—*My Friend Meurtrier*.

Daudet, Alphonse—*The Siege of Berlin*.

Stevenson, R. L.—*Ollala*.

—*Markheim*.

Kipling, Rudyard—*At the End of the Passage*.

—*They*.

Wharton, Edith—*The Bolted Door*.

Dyar, Muriel C.—*The Crime in Jedidiah Peeble's House* (Harper's, March, 1912).

Stockley, Cynthia—*The Road to Tuli* (McClure's, April, 1912).

Norris, Kathleen—*Bridging the Years* (American Magazine, May, 1912).

White, William Allen—*A Kansas "Childe Roland"* (in the volume entitled *In Our Town*, Doubleday, Page, 1909).

## CHAPTER II.—WHAT SHALL YOU WRITE ABOUT?

1. *The importance of this question.* The beginner instinctively pays little heed to his story themes. He feels that he may follow his own inclination, inasmuch as the range and variety of subjects successfully dealt with by story writers seem limitless. This impression, however, is dangerously misleading. Whether viewed as a work of art or as a piece of merchandise for the magazine market, the *genre* is definitely restricted in more respects than any other form of fiction. Whoever exceeds its bounds is almost certainly foredoomed to produce a story that is either ineffective or unsalable or both.

2. *The theme is limited in three directions.* There are many restraints upon the theme. The most important of these may be classified under three heads:

- a. *Those set by the story form.*
- b. *Those set by the writer's knowledge and beliefs.*
- c. *Those set by his audience.*

Not a few restraints are merely commercial; and these we shall consider in the last chapter of this book.

a. *Limits set by the story form.* Recall what the short story is: a dramatic narrative with a single effect. Two ideals are to be realized in one form, and each of them is to give its own peculiar determination to this form.

i. The theme must yield a *plot*. Human conduct without the developing crisis will not turn the trick, and the most terrific crisis without the struggling, controlling

force of human nature at work in it will also fail. To be persuaded of this, study that wonderfully accurate and sympathetic medley of middle Western sketches by William Allen White, entitled *In Our Town*.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these are not short stories, either in form or by intent; but some of them are, notably the one entitled *By the Rod of His Wrath*. This is a terrific picture of the silent, crushing power of righteous public opinion. Here stands John Markley, who defied the decencies by putting aside his wife in middle age for a brazen office girl. And here stand John Markley's old friends, facing the moral crisis of having to be loyal either to him or to his outraged wife (and through her to their own professed ethics). The story tells how they decided and lived up to their decision. Loose in its informality of narrative, it is none the less a genuine short story, flawless except for an insufficient dramatic emphasis upon some *one* of the many intense episodes in it. Now contrast with it *The Young Prince*, in the same collection. This, you will instantly find, is only a swift little biography of a cub reporter. There lurks in it no complication, tragic or comic, wherein the Prince's loyalty, his pride, his sense of humor, his courage, or any other moral trait works out its own salvation. The picture is true; and there is some action, but not the sort that makes drama.

ii. The theme, in order to produce a single effect, must be one which can be adequately handled *within the span of a single perusal*. It was Poe who pointed out this peculiar limitation. Lacking it, the novel "deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal modify, annul or contract . . . the impressions of the book. But simply cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true

<sup>1</sup>Doubleday, Page, 1909.

unity." This psychological fact quite sharply defines the pure external magnitude of the short story, though not nearly so much as one might imagine from a survey of the magazines. For reasons discussed elsewhere, editors have limited the story to an ordinary maximum of 8,000 words (in England about 6,000) and they sometimes deceive themselves into believing that this measures the natural or proper size. As a matter of fact, it bears only a remote relation to the artistic (the psychological) maximum, which is fixed entirely by the particular theme and the particular reader. The single effect can be perfectly attained in a narrative of 40,000 words, if only the theme is sufficiently obvious and simple, and the reader is exceptionally intelligent. Henry James' ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*, is of that length, and certainly a person of concentration will derive from it a unity of impression no less pronounced than that which he gains from Poe's very brief *Morella*. No doubt, the gum-chewing stenographer who devours the literary offspring of Mr. Robert W. Chambers might have her difficulties with James' work. But this is only another way of my saying that the permissible length of a story depends upon the number of ideas and effects which its reader can easily carry in mind at once; and this, of course, varies with the reader's mental equipment. If he happens to be an Australian bushman, he reaches his limit at the twentieth monosyllable. And if he is an eminent mathematician, he may read a hundred full-grown modern novels in quick succession and get from the whole group only a single effect, namely that of tedium.

This individual difference is reckoned with roughly by magazines which cater to widely different classes of readers. A pretty accurate index of the public an editor seeks is given in the length of stories he favors.

If he prefers 2,500-word varieties, he is certainly appealing to a shallower type of mind than his colleague up the street does who handles 5,000-word goods. It is the average length, of course, that is significant; and variations of a few hundred words are wholly meaningless. But, with some innocuous exaggeration, we might speak of the 2,000-word reader, the 4,000-word reader, the 8,000-word reader, and the 15,000-word reader. Now, it is the likings and capacities of the first three species which define the practical limits of most contemporary stories.

ii. This 8,000-word limit sets three restrictions upon the theme. It excludes all subjects which involve:

- a. An intricate plot,
- β. Elaborate staging, and
- γ. Detailed interpretation.

a. *Intricacy.* No theme can be used whose plot contains more features and complications than can be clearly presented and worked through within the space limit above mentioned. And conversely, what can be adequately depicted in less than 2,000 words is almost certain to be no dramatic narrative, and hence no short story. For a dramatic narrative involves a large number of factors, the baldest account of which generally consumes more than that number of words.

β. *Staging.* This is the least important and most plastic of the restrictions. By the staging is meant that much of the total setting which is actually presented in detail to the reader. Often the setting is much fuller than the staging; just as in the early drama, where the setting, say a forest in Warwickshire, was represented in the staging by a single plucked bough, and a silent character on the scene symbolized by a cloak flung over a stick propped up in a corner. As with plays, so with short

stories. Some of them demand very little explicit development of the scenic circumstances under which their plots grow, while others, like *Munksgaard*, owe their very life to the vivid fulness of the environing conditions. Now, it is only with reference to these latter themes that staging becomes a serious problem; and, as they are not very common, the student need not pay much attention to the difficulty they raise. Let him learn only the two general rules by which they are rejected:

X A. A theme is unfit for a short story if its plot calls for a staging so elaborate that there remains for the development of the dramatic narrative not space enough within the assigned limits of the story's total length.

X B. A theme is unfit also if its plot calls for the extensive staging of situations which interrupt the dramatic narrative.

For further comment on this topic see the chapter on integrative intensifiers.

γ. *Interpretation.* The equivocation in this term must be cleared away before we can discuss the point here to be made. By 'interpretation' artists frequently mean their own personal rendering of an idea or a scene or a play. When, for instance, an actor gives his interpretation of Hamlet, he represents the dismal Dane, not as Hamlet himself may have been, nor yet as Shakespeare may have conceived him, but as the player himself believes the character is most truly or most dramatically exhibited. Again, a writer is said to interpret New York when he gives you a picture of the town as he sees it. Thus, in *The Claws of the Tiger*, Gouverneur Morris offers a powerful interpretation of the life-wrecking power and unspeakable vice of Tammany Hall.

Now this meaning of 'interpretation' ought to be discarded; and for the excellent reason that, as soon as you apply it consistently, you strip it of significance. Any and every account becomes an interpretation. A private

letter sketching the ravages of mumps in the family is an interpretation. A morsel of gossip about the rector's cook eloping with the ice man is interpretation. For does not the reporter give you a picture of affairs as he perceives them? And does he not present them in the form he thinks best? He assuredly does. But in so doing he does not rise above the artistic level of a camera; for the camera too renders the landscape as it appears from its own private point of view and as sensed by a film of peculiar chemical make-up. Therefore, to speak of interpreting a story theme, in this loose sense, is to speak of nothing special. You do not graze any technical problem of artistic expression.

The word has, however, another and a deeper meaning. To discern the significance of something, to clarify that which is obscure, to construe something which one's audience is in doubt about; all that is genuine interpretation. It is a deliberate intellectual enterprise. Its purpose may not be the preacher's; it may be more akin to the scientist's. To finish with a Q. E. D., like Euclid, and to let the reader use the inference as he will, may be the author's one desire. And, when it is, the story gains mightily. There are few specimens of truly great stories which are wholly devoid of this quasi-scientific demonstration. *Markheim* conspicuously proves that there is always a way of checking a wicked habit, albeit a desperate way. *Moonlight* proves dramatically that, to sympathize with an emotion, one must experience it or something like it. Howells' *A Circle in the Water* proves in its own style that love alone arrests the consequences of wrong. And so on, with only occasional exceptions, unless we take into account simple love and adventure stories. It is pretty clear that, though interpretation is not essential to the short story, it elevates and glorifies the form as nothing else can.



So defined, the limitations under which interpretation suffers in the short story form are apparent. And the first of these is the one which Brunetière had in mind when he wrote that the theme of the short story must be 'socially insignificant'. This phrase is inexact and needlessly damning, but it does point toward a profound distinction between short story and novel. There are many human truths which resemble Euclid's first theorems in that they are simple, fundamental, and proved in a few words. But there are many more which can be compared only with the propositions of integral calculus; for they are accessible only through a labyrinth of details. It is a simple truth that public opinion can, without force or fury, crush even a rich and powerful man who flouts it. It is a very obscure and intricate proposition that will tell the whole truth about the rights of a man to divorce a wife he is weary of. Some very intelligent people will say, in great heat, that the man has no right; and other no less intelligent people will assert vehemently that it is criminal to compel anybody to remain wedded against his or her wish. All of which proves that there are two sides to the question, and maybe twenty, and that nobody quite understands them all. Now the former truth, about the still power of the public, can be comprehended within the compass of a few thousand words; hence it is suited to the story form, and White has successfully employed it thus in *By the Rod of His Wrath*. But the second truth has not yet been demonstrated conclusively even in the longest novel; and it may never be, so multitudinous are the human interests which play into the problem of divorce, and so delicate is their weighing. Reason enough, then, for forbidding it to the story writer! And so, though it is raised in the reader's mind by White's story, White does not develop it at all.

The defect in Brunetière's verdict now appears. It is not the social insignificance of John Markley's fate that led White to depict it in a short story instead of in a novel. Surely, few crises are of deeper importance to the individual and of wider consequence to the world than that which the village faced when Markley cast off his wife. What is there anywhere in Balzac or Thackeray that more deeply concerns society? Would the author have given us a false notion of its importance, had he expanded the story of it into a novel? By no means. Well then, why did he not make a novel of it? Simply because it could be perfectly demonstrated in a short story. When all is said and done, it is the very same reason that dissuaded Euclid from expanding his famous proposition about the angles of a triangle into a 100,000-word volume. A hundred and odd words did the business to perfection; and Euclid was too wise to exceed perfection. He was not influenced by the fact that the truth about the triangle is of prodigious social importance. Had he done so; had he made the *telling* of the story commensurate with the *value* of the truth in it, forty thick tomes would not have contained it.

But, happily for the human race, the value of what men have to say has not the slightest connection with the fulness of its recounting. A truth, whether of geometry or of constitutional law or of every-day human nature, whether syllogistically or dramatically phrased, whether precious or trivial, fixes its own number of words pretty definitely. If it is intricate, it will demand a great array of language; if simple, one sentence may make it as clear as the sun in a cloudless sky. Here is, at bottom, no mystery of art or logic; it is only the primitive virtue of straightforward speech.

This virtue imposes a restraint upon the interpretations which the short story writer may indulge in; a restraint,

by the way, which few beginners heed or, heeding, endure with patience. It is this:

*Do not attempt to interpret any matter which society finds problematic today*

If the human race has not yet found a clear answer to a question of social consequence, it is because the question is entangled and dark, or at least two-sided. And whatever is so cannot be presented in such a manner as to produce that *single effect* which is the inalienable charm and right of the short story.

b. *The theme as limited by the writer's knowledge and beliefs.* Before dipping into this matter, the reader will kindly call to mind that we are now considering the artistic ideals of the short story, not the commercial possibilities. Were he to overlook this fact, he would be perplexed by the two rules now to be framed, the first of which is:

i. *The writer must possess genuine knowledge of the matter actually employed in the dramatic narrative; but need not know any more.*

This rule meets with scant reverence. A horde of stories favored by editors exhibit appalling ignorance, not only of elementary facts about human nature but even about the habits and customs of the times, places, and social castes about whom the authors fabulate.<sup>1</sup> And a much larger multitude of stories give evidence that their authors, after taking pen in hand, have asked some Public Library assistant about the flora and fauna of the Tahiti Islands, and scanned Baedeker to find out whether Russians drink vodka through a straw. But all this only goes to show what everybody knows, namely that, within cer-

<sup>1</sup> In fairness to editors, it should be added that the better magazines are admitting fewer stories of this sort than they did twenty-five years ago. But within the past twelvemonth at least half a dozen absurdities have been published.

tain bounds, gold-brick literature is a marketable commodity, no less than gold-brick stocks and gold-brick religion are. Also, it goes to show that few people can write good stories, and of those who can still fewer can pour them forth on contract, month in, month out. And so the wretched editors—Heaven comfort them!—have to take what they can get.

The other clause in the rule is equally ignored. Even experienced writers often wade through volumes and volumes of sociological statistics, as a preliminary to contriving a story, let us say, about a Madison Street sweatshop. And I have heard promising young writers sigh, almost tearfully, that they could never hope to write psychological character stories like James' because the poor dears had not mastered the other James' psychology.

Now, this despair is a baseless superstition. The truth is, most facts that are important to scientists are only distantly connected with those which help to make a situation dramatic. These latter are exclusively those *which the persons in the dramatic situation are directly aware of*. The sweater's kicks and curses, the garlicky air, the flat, high voice from the top of a sick workman's filling lungs, the twenty cents clipped off the week's pay for the crooked stitching,—these are the raw material of sweatshop drama. For it is they that men perceive, they that provoke to wrath, they that move victims to slay or to fling themselves from bridges. The writer familiar with all such factors may dispense with the others.

For this reason, the writer in search of material must turn, not to libraries nor to schools and laboratories, but to intimate every-day affairs. Other more dignified sources of truth will give him his bearings in the midst of life and sharpen his eyes toward good and evil. But never

can they teach him how to make his characters life-like, his situations real, and his climaxes tense.

There remains a second limiting rule:

ii. *The writer is free to develop a theme which he does not believe. But he must understand how and why the characters in the story feel and act as they do. And he must portray the reasons and causes of their acts sympathetically. If he cannot, he must give up the theme.*

This would scarcely be worth mentioning, but for the loose talk about 'sincerity' and 'earnestness' which many excellent critics, and even writers, are wont to indulge in. We have heard Chesterton assuring us that good fiction comes only from doctrinaires; and other milder exaggerators are constantly proclaiming that even the lightest tale, in order to be good art, must 'have a message', or 'point a moral', or come from the author's soul. And so, every season under such promptings, comes a host of fresh learners striving to pack their intensest beliefs into little stories. To forestall the harmful consequences of their misunderstanding, let them dwell upon *the vast, conspicuous difference between belief (or moral earnestness) and sympathetic imagination.*

This difference must be apparent to anybody who dreams vividly or retains some shred of early youth's power of fantasy. The mind so constituted perceives the unreal as real and the preposterous as plausible. While the spell lasts, nothing mars the perfect reality of its presentments. Fiends, abysses, diamonds like hens' eggs, the men of Mars,—they are all, for the swift instant, just what they seem to be. Reason, paralyzed for the nonce, does not challenge their status; nor does the acid of common sense eat into their tenuous stuff. And so, in one sense, they convince us, and we believe in them.

But they are not convincing in the more proper meaning of the word. They do not lay hold of us as the ideas

in *Heretics* lay hold of Chesterton, or as those in *Widowers' Houses* master Bernard Shaw. They are not faiths which grow out of life and, in turn, regulate it; they merely possess such coherence and vivacity that, *while we contemplate them by themselves*, we cannot doubt them. As soon as we withdraw from their little sphere and reason about them, they lose their power over us. Consider, for instance, the tales of Poe. What is there in *The Fall of the House of Usher* that one could believe with a doctrinaire's fine frenzy? Absolutely nothing. The whole sombre creation is a picture, nothing more. But Poe dreamed it so clearly, and the disasters of it hang together in every minute detail so organically that the catastrophe possesses all the fleeting persuasiveness of a nightmare. While you read it, you inhabit a strange land. And the emotions which this, your bewildering translation, induce are all that you ask of the story teller. If he can produce this illusion of reality, you do not care what he believes personally about anything.

There is no denying that a story shaped by some lofty purpose often rises to heights attained by no idle play of the imagination. Not even the hilarity of an O. Henry nor his smother of puns mitigates the grim earnestness of *An Unfinished Story*; and few of his more light-hearted tales linger in the memory as does this attack upon the employer who underpays his shop-girls. And yet, when all is said, moral earnestness is only a strengthener, and high purposes are seven-league boots, at best, in the realm of the story writer. They improve, but they do not create. They *intensify*, but they do not furnish the *material* of brief fiction. Excellent they are, but not essential. In proof of this, many an author can testify that some of his most artistic, most successful works have developed themes which he disliked, characters whom he scorned, and ideas which he could not seriously enter-

tain. I have been told that there is a story writer of renown who deliberately shelves every plot of his which stirs him deeply in a serious way. And another echoes what Frohman says of the plays he reads: "Every one that I like personally is sure to fail."

c. *The theme as limited by the reader.*

It is difficult to separate the artistic restrictions from the commercial, in this case. For what a reader likes he will buy, and what he dislikes he will leave on the bookstand. Furthermore, he is much more interested in the topic of a book than in its style or the opinion it voices or the kinds of people appearing in it. His first decisive query is this: What does the story narrate, adventure or romance or a humorous situation or the inner life of a character? And if he wishes catch-breath deviltry, no amount of fine speech or pretty turns will make a simple love story attractive to him. For this reason, his influence will be discussed in the chapter on the business of story writing. He has nothing to do with the art of writing, but only with the art of selling the written.

3. *Available story material.* Thus far we have been indicating what is not good story stuff. It is now time to ask what is good.

a. *Theme.* There is no positive quality which marks the available theme. You may, if you choose, show dramatically that black is white, or that women should vote, or that virtue is an illusion, or that love is a lovely thing, or that lone widows ought never buy mining stock, or that things as they are aren't as they should be, or anything else. In brief, all we can say is that the theme may be whatever permits of dramatic development with a single effect. But this tells nothing about the particular content and quality of the idea.

b. *Plot.* Here we begin to see light, and under it the story material shows up pretty definite. Almost every

experienced reader senses—at least vaguely—the quality which makes ideas and incidents and characters good for dramatic narrative. This quality has many names: one is ‘human interest’, another is ‘emotional intensity’, a third ‘truth about human nature’, and a fourth ‘character revelation’. But these are all too hazy, and the last is certainly too narrow. The first points at the truth but does not attain it. Editors assure us that ‘human interest’ is the flavor and perfume of every excellent story. But what is human interest? How shall we know it when we meet it? Has it a formula, that the tyro of Grub Street may make it to order? Profound silence in editorial offices! And the literary critics are not much noisier. The truth is, no clear analysis of this nebulous literary virtue has been rendered. But the way has been cleared by contemporary psychologists. Their studies of attention and interest are suggestive.

c. *Interest*. Between simple attention and interest stretches a wide gulf. A person attends to things more or less passively. A loud noise, a flash of light, a strange voice, indeed almost anything different from what we happen to be noticing at the moment, will draw our minds in that peculiar way which is called attending. Not so, however, do things compel us to be interested in them. The direction of our interest is set largely by our own wills and our beliefs. We *give* attention, but we *take* interest. In the first case there is a yielding, in the second a seizing. When interested in something, we *lay hold* of its features and *we actively think about them, in some of their bearings*. Are you interested in the ventures of a slack-wire artist? Then you surely do more than follow his shaking march across the stage. You *wonder* how he will manage to keep his balance after dropping his pole. You try to *figure out* what move he will make next. You *judge* his chances of breaking a leg.



You *reflect* upon the patience and skill his feats represent. In short, you *think hard*. And so it is with great affairs, too. If you take interest, say, in immigration or in divorce or in Roosevelt, you do not merely attend as you might to the pop of a toy pistol. You think, think, think about causes and consequences, about the perils and the benefits, about the right and the wrong of it all. Here we have the infallible psychological mark of 'human interest'; *the interesting thing is the thing which provokes thought*.

d. *What provokes thought?* This query arises at once. For, unless it is answered, the above description will not enlighten us much. Fortunately, though, our pragmatic philosophers have hit upon its solution. *Thought is provoked by any situation from which our instincts and our established habits do not automatically deliver us*. It offers us a new critical weapon which cleanly cuts the fit from the unfit material of artistic fiction. But let us first inspect the fact itself.

Most people think only when they have to. This incontestable fact you may utter with a cynical sneer, if you have not reflected upon it. But if you have, you know that the arrangement is not so bad as it sounds. Indeed, it is pretty useful, taken by and large. It is not ideal, to be sure; in a perfectly appointed world we should never think at all but should only enjoy life, solving all problems mechanically, as we dislodge dust from the eyes and digest our food. Seeing the universe is what it is, though, a place full of change and entanglements, so complex that no machinery, however intricate and well fashioned, could do the right thing always at the right time, this painful and difficult activity of thinking must be invoked. Whatsoever we can manage through some other agency we do so manage. And, if thinking is imperative for a while, we make that while as brief as possi-

ble. The baby thinks in learning to walk, but as soon as his feet move surely he refrains from cogitation. He thinks over his speech, too, but quickly he outgrows that, transforming discourse from an intellectual performance to a reflex habit. And he never thinks about the order and choice of words again, unless they give rise to some new, unforeseen perplexity; as, for instance, they might, were he suddenly afflicted with stammering or stage fright. This is no scandal, it is a great convenience. Thanks to it, men are able to concern themselves with fresh enterprises and hence to progress. Indeed, civilization is a titanic monument to thoughtlessness, no less than to thought. The supreme triumph of mind is to dispense with itself. For what would intellect avail us, if we could not withdraw it from action in all the habitual encounters of daily life? Suppose we had to think how to lace our shoes and steer sandwiches to our mouths! And what if we had to set going the machinery of Aristotle's logic whenever we sought to say "Good morning"!

e. *The thought-provoking situation is what we call a problem.* This is in accord with common usage, and also with philosophy. Its implication carries us far from many current theories about fiction. For it means that '*human interest*' is confined to problems, and that every good story is a problem story. Pretty soon we shall have to explain what a problem story is and incidentally clear away the easy but false supposition that it deals with only the acute and ultimate social issues, as the 'problem play' does. For the moment, though, let us draw another distinction.

Not every problem awakens the kind of human interest which editors sigh for. A situation provoking thought is not inevitably suitable for fiction. If it were, all the innumerable puzzles of science and politics and huck-

sterdom would fall within its domain; yea, and even the questions the Walrus put to the Carpenter. Is a butterfly a moth, and if not, why not? There you have matter calling for some exercise of intellect; and yet it is obviously not to be threshed out by O. Henry or Henry James. Although it awakens human interest, it is *incompatible with the ideals of the short story*. For it is not intrinsically dramatic. This fact at once suggests that there are several kinds of thought-provoking situations, and that only certain of these yield to the story teller's art.

f. *Three varieties of situations*. A little reflection will show that situations may be classified with respect to the manner of managing them. Three types thereupon appear:

-i. Those which can be managed by *action* alone. Thus, the dodging of a missile; rebuffing a person who seeks to tempt you with some outrageous offer; grasping a friend's arm, as he slips on an icy sidewalk. In such cases you do not stop to think; you simply 'do the right thing'.

ii. Situations which can be managed with *pure thought* alone. For instance, multiplying 56 by 9; or discovering the motives of a supposed friend who has grossly insulted you; or laying bare a conspiracy, by inference from a chance remark you overhear in the street car.

iii. Situations which can be managed only by *thought and some consequent personal action*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in *A Coward*,

<sup>1</sup> Were this a book on the psychology of conduct, I should describe a fourth situation, namely that which can be managed only by thinking and *simultaneous* action. Here the action is not the *consequence* of prior thinking, as it is in the dramatic situation; rather is it an *aid* in thinking. Of this sort is all *experiment*. One reflects up to a certain point; then does something to test his provisional inferences or else to clarify the matter of the problem; and

the predicament into which Maupassant brings the viscount; the unhappy man must first think a long time, but thinking alone will not solve his difficulty. Thought must be followed by action. And so too in every dramatic situation. Here we have come upon the mark of the species.

g. *The third type of situation fulfills only one ideal of the short story.* In the primitive sense of the words, this kind of situation gives rise to the behavior called dramatic. Certainly the thinking it evokes displays human nature somehow, and certainly too the action that grows out of that thinking is 'in character'. Nevertheless, one might easily suggest a host of cases possessing these features and yet being too dull and colorless for fictional purposes. To give an extreme sample: a cook might inadvertently pepper a stew with roach powder three minutes before family and guests were to dine. There's a situation that ought to stir any ambitious culinary champion to deep thought. Cook might ponder desperately, torn between the impulse to fly into the Plutonian night and the impulse to open a can of soused mackerel and serve it in place of the wrecked stew. In the end, the fish might triumph over the flight; cook would clutch the can-opener desperately and march into the pantry. There you find all the *elements* of mere drama, and yet not the *plot* of even a weak short story. The trouble with it is the sharp decline in the last act. You may be moderately excited by the fatal dose of roach powder. You may wonder poignantly over the prospects of cook's blasted reputation or over the fate of the diners, if cook serves the stew. But, the minute you learn that mackerel are on hand to rescue

so on, with constant interplay. For psychological and ethical purposes it is important to hold this variety of situation apart. But the story writer need not concern himself with it, beyond noticing its existence.

cook from ignominy and the diners from hospital, the tension is over. You know that the finish will be calm, easy, and cheerful. In other words, *there is one effect in the crucial situation of the episode, and another effect in the denouement; and this violates the second ideal of the short story.*

h. For the purposes of the short story, *the complication, the crisis, and the denouement must be of either equal or ascending effectiveness.* Nothing can be more deadly than the declining effect. It is even worse than a story which is dull throughout, for it awakens in you hopes of a thrilling end and then disappoints you. Few will hesitate to confirm this fact, and yet many persist in ignoring it when they turn to write fiction. I am continually amazed at the scant attention given by fairly capable authors to the sustained finish. They conjure up excellent dramatic situations and vigorous, sharply accentuated characters, but halt as soon as they have done that much. It may be that they fancy their heroines can work out their own salvation and at the same stroke please the reader. At any rate, this delusion has been fostered and popularized by a literary school which some are pleased to miscall 'psychological realism'. The ideal of this school is to depict the stream of consciousness in its natural flow across a natural world. Given a certain character, what must he do in a certain situation? What impulses, feelings, or prejudices will dominate his conduct? It is, they say, the artist's task to answer this question pictorially. As Howells puts it: "the true plot comes out of the character; that is, the man does not result from the things he does, but the things he does result from the man, and so plot comes out of character, plot aforethought does not characterize". Or, as one might say a little more exactly, the deliberate choice of a

man in a given situation is the stuff of which a good story must be made.

Now, for argument's sake, we might grant this much (though we deny it as a matter of fact); and yet we should have to repudiate the all too common inference from it, that *all* cases of a person choosing and shaping his conduct will serve the fictionist. No logic can extract this proposition from the original one, and only a narrow artistic theory can defend it against the army of adverse instances. Few indeed are the stories beloved of the world which depict the triumph of *pure* human nature; and many are those which, having done this, fail to delight the average cultured reader. In *The Pursuit of the Piano*<sup>1</sup> Howells himself has furnished a capital specimen for the refuting of his own theory.

No jaded reader could ask for a more promising, whimsical situation than that which sets this story going. A soberly romantic lawyer chances to catch the name of a young lady on a boxed piano which, on its way to her New Hampshire home, passes the café window at which he sits breakfasting. On his journey to some friends the piano haunts him, bobbing up at every station. First idly wondering, then amused, then vexed, then jesting over it with his friends, the attorney finally, by dint of thinking much about the instrument and its owner, . . . But we must not tell the story just yet. Stopping here, you will surely sense the delightful possibilities of the odd encounter. Now, if the theory of psychological realism is sound, a good story would inevitably result from the depicting of the hero controlling and finishing up the complication, by the use of his own inner nature, his impulses, his desires, his fancies, his serious reflections. Unfortunately, though, it does not work out that way here. The inner history of

<sup>1</sup> In *A Pair of Patient Lovers*.

Gaites, the lawyer, is faithfully drawn. Two or three hundred of his mental states are painstakingly recorded; and every turn, halt, and advance toward the end which such a man in just such an affair must attain is illuminated. But, for all that, the story ends flat—and the flatness is quite exasperating, in spite of the delicious predicament Gaites is brought into at the close. This predicament is irrelevant to the plot,—a mere adornment, albeit a good one. The story ends with the true lovers embracing in the Cloister; for then and there the initial complication solves itself, the pursuit of the piano is over, and the central character works out what we all hope is his salvation. Now, this entire scene is incomparably weaker than any before it. It neither thrills nor excites nor tickles nor alleviates nor even offends. It is just what a sane young man and a sane young woman would do, according to all the laws of mental balance and contemporary manners; which is to say that it is as undramatic as coffee and rolls.

What does this suggest, if not that a real character seldom acts dramatically? Still less often does his conduct in a crisis appear dramatic *to a spectator who sees all his inner motives, impulses, and directions in their entirety*. Let us frame the truth with a paradox: let us say that most acts which are true to character are not characteristic. Much that a man does under the guidance of some impulse or sentiment may be *consistent* with the latter and yet may not *imply* it.

Here once more we discover the dramatic effect resting upon a purely intellectual one. If you will turn to your Elements of Logic, you will find that any given proposition is implied by an infinite number of pairs of other propositions. Thus, to show that Socrates is mortal, you may assert that Socrates is an Athenian, and all Athenians are mortal; or that Socrates is a philosopher, and all phi-

losophers return to dust; or that Socrates is harassed by his wife, and that all men who live in such connubial conflict come to an untimely end; and so on, endlessly. It is for this purely logical reason that, if told only that Socrates is mortal, you do not know much about him. True as mortality is to his nature, it does not characterize it; it does not mark off this man from other creatures, nor does it indicate its own inner necessity. It is nothing more than a scrap of information, as unenlightening as it is true. For, though it *is implied* by Socrates' nature, it does not *imply* this nature; and hence it is no genuine revelation.

Now apply this distinction to character drawing. Suppose you wish to picture a cruel man. You will cast about for appropriate incidents. You may observe a cruel man for a long time and jot down all that he does. Much of this will doubtless flow from his harshness; he may squeeze his debtors, he may beat children, and he may know no gratitude. But can you, merely by setting down such episodes, be sure of revealing the villain's personality? Not at all. For all such acts, though involved in the trait of cruelty, do not necessarily involve this trait. A kind man in desperate straits may squeeze debtors; a gentle neurasthenic lady may beat children mercilessly, when she is 'having a spell'; and a merely stupid man may be thankless toward his benefactors. These acts, therefore, carry in themselves no final, irresistible conviction about their perpetrators; for a great variety of temperaments, appetites, and passing emotions may terminate in such conduct. Not even the psychological inevitability of their happening in a given situation lends them any genuine significance. A sneeze is more inevitable than a woman's decision in a love affair. A sane man's resolve to come indoors when it rains is more inevitable than his resolve to forgive an enemy.



But which is more dramatic? Which reveals the character?

We may, in conclusion, bring the matter into relation with the other ideal of the short story, the single effect. The writer who begins with a character supposed to have a certain trait and with a situation in which this trait is to be developed must, of course, live up to his promises. He must persuade us that his hero is just the sort of person intended. Now, if the hero's conduct is *merely* consistent throughout the tale, his nature will be equivocal. If it is equivocal, it is vague. If vague, it lacks the effect of a clear-cut character. Hence the story produces at least two effects, that of the initial situation and all its half-pledges, and that of the development. And, so, it has failed.

i. *The single effect in dramatic narrative is generally produced, not by depicting a mere problem, but by depicting a conflict. And this conflict ends in one of two ways: (a) it brings out an act which is uniquely characteristic of the actor, or else (b) it finishes with a merely consistent act of violation.* These are the only two clearly marked types of conduct which hold the reader's interest to the last without altering its quality.

a. *The uniquely characteristic act.* In an oft-cited remark to Maupassant Flaubert says:

When you pass a grocer sitting at the door of his shop, a janitor smoking his pipe, a stand of hackney coaches, show me that grocer and that janitor, their attitudes, their whole physical appearance, embracing likewise their whole moral nature, so that I cannot confound them with any other grocer or any other janitor. Make me see, in one word, that a certain cab horse does not resemble the fifty others that follow or precede it.

This advice is sound, though not to be followed except in the handling of the most important features of a story,

especially in character drawing and plotting. To catch individuality is the artist's highest achievement; for individuality is single in its effect and essentially dramatic, thus realizing the two virtues of brief fiction. An act which brings out this, the quality of the whole man, need not be exciting. It may be, apart from its setting, the veriest trifle, as it is in O. Henry's *The Moment of Victory*, where the hero, bespangled with war medals, walks up to the girl who long ago had jilted him contemptuously and says to her: "Oh, I don't know! Maybe I could if I tried!" Being ignorant of the hero's previous deed and of the girl's cruelty, you would find little in this climax to interest you. But, as a revelation of Willie Robbins' career and soul, it is perfect. It is not simply the truth, it is *the one* truth that enlightens.

b. *The consistent act of violation.* Please construe 'violation' in its legal sense. It means disregard of law or custom. Thus it includes not only excesses of physical force but also every case of formal transgression, however mild or free from appeal to brawn or malicious cunning. The splendid lie by which Jean François cheated justice and saved his cowardly friend, in Coppée's masterpiece, *The Substitute*, is no deed of brute force; but it does do violence to law and custom in that it delivered a criminal from justice and punished an innocent man. And so it falls well within our definition. So too does the horrible murder of the little boy in Merimée's *Mateo Falcone*. It is not the outburst of passion nor the horror of its deed that makes it a sound dramatic ending. It is its human consistency which, added to the intensity of the act, warrants it. That is to say, a man living in Corsica and brought up as Mateo Falcone was would come to esteem loyalty above justice, even to the point of slaying his own son for betraying a criminal who had put his trust in the lad. This violates the *reader's* notion of law

and order, as well as the official proprieties of Corsica. If it did not, the story's ending would be quite flat; it would not differ from the legalized hanging of a condemned murderer, which is an undramatic horror. May it not well be that a Corsican bandit would find Merimée's grisly tale a tame moral story? For to him Falcone's deed would not appear at all unlawful. Its harshness would strike him as the unfortunate but necessary harshness of a wise custom wisely enforced. He would say that it was no more dramatic than defending oneself with a cane against street thugs.

j. *The three levels of conflict.* We have said that the only situation suited to fictional presentation is that which, in real life, would stimulate the characters to thought and action. The broader structural features of such a situation have just been indicated; it now remains for us to point out the material of which it is made. This exhibits three pretty sharp forms: the conflict may lie between,

a. Man and the physical world.

b. Man and man.

c. One force and another, in the same man.

a. *Man and the physical world.* This is the primary battle of life, the battle which the coddled city-folk forget so easily. The struggle against a head-wind, the nursing of a pitiful corn crop through a desperate drought, the hungry searching for a rabbit in the bitter winter wood, the flight from wild beasts, and the escape from savage captors,—of such is still the life of the Lower Billion, who inhabit most of the earth beyond Fifth Avenue. Those who are not of the Lower Billion sometimes look down upon such adventures and sniff top-loftily at the 'thrillers' which are written about them. But you must pay no heed to such talk. It is only the critics' back-handed way of saying that they are too far from raw life to understand it sympathetically.

For the average reader, man's battle with nature will continue to be the most absorbing story theme, and man's triumphant conspiracy against nature's blind, dumb cruelty will remain the supreme story plot, until the last frontier has yielded to the moving picture show and the hot-water flat. And, even in that day, the adventure story will grip the young and the under-educated; for to these the world teems with mystery, perils, and sudden shocks. And they will read what they understand.

b. *Man and man.* Society is a gigantic compromise whereby millions of people who differ from one another more widely than chimpanzee differs from orang-outang may rub up against one another with a minimum of offense. Excellent as the compromise is, in many respects, it is not and never will be so skilfully devised that every man may have what he wants and be rid of what irks him. In this unpleasant fact you have, reduced to lowest terms, the basic dilemma which generates thousands of story plots, all of which may fairly be called *social*. Two lads wooing the same lass; two workmen after the same job; two millionaires scheming against each other, to control a railroad; two politicians seeking the same contract; two ladies sighing to lead the Upper Ten of Hicksville; two school boys after the captaincy of the baseball team: these are headed for a very different battle from that which the wilderness hunter wages against lions and famine. They are matching desire against desire, faith against faith, personality against personality.

It is in this field of conflicts that the average mature man of today finds his steadiest entertainment. And the reason for this lies on the surface of affairs. It is because fiction readers take deepest interest in what touches vitally their daily life. Adventure stories will thrill more sharply and be sought more eagerly in hours of utter relaxation. But they must yield to the social story, for

they lack altogether its power of awakening thought and the more thoughtful emotions. There was an age when they did not wholly lack it; and that not so very long ago. As late as Shakespeare's day most people inhabited a world of freebooters, sudden wars, and irresistible plagues; a world whose brutal vicissitudes called for a man's best thinking and commanded his attention for a goodly part of his life. And so adventure had a reality and a seriousness even to the comfortable burgher and the office scrivener. It was not a thing apart from life. To the burgher the press-gang might come in the night and lure him aboard the King's four-decker, to brave the cutlasses of Barbary pirates, on far-off, sweltering seas. And the village clerk might become, on an instant's command, the go-between for lordly lovers or the spy of high intriguers. But these possibilities are no more. Ours are other dangers. We may be swindled by rascally promoters, or looted by the tariff, or injured by society's foibles and superstitions; or caught in a conflict of morals; and so it is to these that our imagination will turn most freely and with the soberest, most sustained interest.

c. *One force with another, in the same man.* This conflict furnishes the stuff of which the so-called psychological story is made. You see most clearly what it is, if you inspect one of its most admirable specimens, *Markheim*. The struggle which Stevenson here depicts is purely internal. It is all the murderer's struggle with himself; or, more precisely, the conflict between two natures in him. The shopkeeper whom he slays is only an incidental presence; the real characters are the souls of Markheim. And so it is always in stories of this class.

Such conflicts are not discerned by the greater public. It is not in the average man's power to analyze and interpret impulses, thoughts and emotions; or even to observe the flux of these accurately. Indeed, he is scarcely

aware of their existence. He knows only the *things* which stir them into existence, and all his instinctive interest is in those same things, as it should be. There is no more reason for his being intimate with them than there is for his investigating minutely the workings of his heart valves or the chemical processes of his spinal cord. The immediate, the pressing problems of his life come from the world about him and from the people with whom he has to deal. What with the worries of business and politics and social affairs, Tom, Dick and Harry find scant time for musing over their private mental machinery. And Nature has wisely endowed them with little knack in that direction.

Thus it appears that the three types of conflict appeal respectively to the three chief types of mind; the primitive, the socialized, and the intellectual. As we shall see later, this fact must influence both the construction and the literary manner of all stories.

## EXERCISES

1. Which qualities of a short story are given in the following? 2. Which are wholly lacking? 3. Which are suggested?

A pathetic plea that a town be saved from desertion has come to the State Railroad Commission. It is from Theresa, 35 miles north of Milwaukee, a settlement of 350 inhabitants, which feels that it is really off the map because the Chicago, Minneapolis & Sault Ste. Marie Railway line was built about a mile and a half away from it. The citizens now ask that the road be compelled to build a spur track, and run trains so that it can realize its destiny.

Theresa was an old-time fur trading post, established in 1842 by Solomon Juneau, son of the founder of Milwaukee, and named after his eldest daughter. Many French Canadians went to live there, and the place at one time seemed to have a bright future. The indifference of the railroad, however, resulted in the building up of Theresa Station outside its old bounds, and in late years the enterprising younger people and immigrants have settled there instead of the original town. Population and prosperity have dwindled in the face of growth all about. For a long time this condition was permitted to go unchecked, but at length the "booster" has come and the Theresa Advancement Association has been formed. It is this organization that has appealed to the Railroad Commission in a quaint document. Here are some of its paragraphs:

The town began to wane in the early 70's in business prominence because of the ever lacking transportation facilities.

Our \$16,000 school has now only two departments and our district has lost the yearly State aid on account of incompetency.

It even has not been successful to induce the retiring farmer as even he wants his accommodations yet and wants to spend the rest of his life in a town that is pressing gaily ahead instead of the one going to the contrary.

Railroad officials, however, say that it would not be worth while to serve the old town, and that it can never realize its ambition to become a metropolis.

1. Is the following report good material for a short story in its present form? If not, state precisely why not.

2. Which type of story will it most easily make? Explain your answer.

A series of stormy sessions of the Hungarian Parliament at Budapest reached their climax today, when Julius Kovacs, a member of the Opposition, fired three shots at Count Tisza, President of the Chamber, and then shot himself in the temple. Count Tisza was unhurt, but Kovacs is believed to be dying.

The shooting was due to Count Tisza's methods of quelling the attempts at obstruction and having offending members carried out by the police. Members of the Opposition who had been suspended on account of recent disturbances gathered in a café in the morning and proceeded in a body to the House.

No attempt was made to prevent their entrance. This clemency is believed to be due to the fact that Count Tisza knew that cinematograph operators were stationed outside the Parliament Building to take pictures of the struggles of members with soldiers, and he wished to prevent such a blow to the prestige of the Chamber.

The members, on reaching their seats, found themselves surrounded by police, who requested the intruders to retire. Some quietly obeyed, but other members of the Opposition raised shouts and caterwaulings against the President. Finally the entire Opposition were driven out of the hall by the police.

Immediately afterward Count Tisza remarked:

"Now that the House is cleared, there is no fear of a repetition of Wednesday's disgraceful scenes. We will proceed to work."

At that instant Deputy Kovacs forced his way into the press gallery, holding a revolver in his hand, and fired three shots at Count Tisza, crying:



"There is still a member of the Opposition in the House. They are not all driven forth. I am he."

Then, turning his weapon on himself, he fired a bullet into his temple and fell to the ground.

Count Tisza's first thought was for the Countess sitting in the gallery, and he made a reassuring gesture, but his wife, who had rushed screaming to the front at the first shot, sank back sobbing and unable to believe the evidence of her eyes that her husband was unhurt.

Read George Meredith's *The Tale of Chloe*, *The House on the Beach* and *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, searching out the quality in each tale which makes toward or away from the short story ideal. Analyze *The Tale of Chloe*, especially with respect to the complexity of (a) the generating circumstances, (b) the plot complication, and (c) the character development.

Which type of situation is dealt with in each of the following stories? Explain clearly your answers.

Kipling,—*The Man Who Would be King*.

Morris, Gouverneur,—*An Idyl of Pelham Bay Park* (in *It*).

London,—*The Sun-Dog Trail* (in *Love of Life*).

O'Grady, R.—*Fettered* (Harper's, May, 1912).

Cather, Willa Sibert,—*The Bohemian Girl* (McClure's, August, 1912).

Gibbon, Perceval,—*The Murderer* (Harper's, August, 1912).

Oppenheim, James,—*Clerks* (Harper's, August, 1912).

Norris, Kathleen,—*S is for Shiftless Susanna* (Everybody's, August, 1912).

Which type of conflict is portrayed in each of the following? Does any story depict two types?

Kipling, R.,—*His Chance in Life* (in *Plain Tales from the Hills*).

—*Watches of the Night* (Ibid.).

- Henry, O.,—*No Story* (in *Options*).  
Freeman, Mary Wilkins,—*Old Lady Pingree* (in *A Humble Romance*).  
Maupassant,—*The Horla*.  
Moore, G.,—*Homesickness* (in *The Untilled Field*).  
Stockton, F. R.,—*The Lady, or the Tiger?*  
Aldrich, T. B.,—*Marjorie Daw*.

## CHAPTER III.—WHAT SHALL YOU SAY ABOUT IT?

### SECTION I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

In the preceding chapter we have looked at the various kinds of dramatic situations which may produce the single effect. We now have to ask how these shall be presented so as to produce it. This question brings us into technique.

1. *Tell the story.* Foolish though it may sound, this is the first advice which the beginner must take to heart. To be sure, it does not inform him how to tell his tale; but it does direct his efforts. For the advice means that *the writer must attend, first of all, to reporting the affairs which constitute the plot.* Put negatively, the substance of this commandment shines forth more clearly. Let us phrase it thus:

*Pay no special attention to description of scenes, character drawing, philosophizing, or stylistic effects until you have stated all the essentials of the plot so clearly that the theme and the outcome and the single effect are apparent (though not necessarily vivid) and unequivocal.*

For many this is the hardest lesson of all. Especially does it irk those straight-away writers who dash off their brilliant ideas at a single sitting, in white heat. Their attention inevitably fluctuates between plot and characters, characters and setting, setting and phraseology; and so, unless the story is tremendously vivid and quite simple in structure, they lose sight of some incidents upon whose sharpening the very sense and

import of the narrative depend. Now I do not say that straight-away writing is therefore to be decried. Far from it. Some good writers work so most naturally, and everybody should try to. But to the beginner the danger of the method is usually present, and its avoidance does not make the above warning less trustworthy; it only shows that the particular writer is exceptionally skilful in carrying many details in his mind simultaneously.

There is no denying that the story's the thing, after all; and that all its finish, its clever turns, its ingenious trappings, and its sparkling epigrams are but poor tinsel, once the drama which they overlay is veiled, blurred, or broken. Now, it is just this axiom which warrants the rule we have laid down. It is this, too, which indirectly accounts for the fact that most good story writers have served an apprenticeship as newspaper reporters. People usually suppose that the work of a reporter brings him into touch with life, and that the intimacy with human nature which he thus acquires is what makes his stories. But this is less than a half-truth. To be sure, the reporter does rub up against the realities of things more than bookkeepers and fishwives do; but there are many professions and trades which penetrate toward the springs of human nature far more deeply than he. The average physician, the lawyer, the policeman, the settlement worker, the business man, the valet, and even the apartment janitor see some Things as They Are more lucidly than he; for they are participants and witnesses, whereas he only jots down their testimony. Why, then, is it that there are so few physicians and lawyers and valets penning memorable stories, and so many reporters doing it? It is because the newspaper man becomes proficient in setting down the story, the whole story, and nothing but the story. The facts without trimmings he must deliver daily.

Doing this, he masters the first and most important trick of story telling.

X The beginner cannot do better than imitate the newspaper man's procedure, in its essentials. ~~For the drill's sake, we shall schematize the latter a little beyond the form of ordinary journalistic practice.~~ In handling a topic important enough to head a column, the reporter commonly performs three operations with his material. First, on the scene of the news-gathering (or on his way back to the office), he jots down phrase-wise the gist of the story, and its most striking feature. At his desk, he leads off with a few paragraphs, giving this same gist in simple narrative, so that the hasty newspaper reader may learn the facts in the first half-minute and, if they do not interest him, skip elsewhere. This opening summary is followed by a more elaborate account which brings in the interesting incidentals. Frequently this approaches literary form; and the writer improves it in later editions of the paper (drawing upon his imagination now and then, alas!).

Now, let the story writer do likewise. Having an idea for a story, let him first sketch it in the following form:<sup>1</sup>

1. *The theme is*.....
2. *The main complication is*.....
3. *The dominant character is*.....
4. *The decisive character trait is*.....
5. *The crucial situation is*.....
6. *The outcome is*.....

In answering these questions, do not use single words or phrases. Use declarative sentences, whenever possible.

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of these questions will be cleared up in later sections of this chapter.

Other modes of expression are hazy and may only conceal a vagueness in your own mind.

Next, draw up a bald report of the story in less than 500 words, mentioning only as much as is needed to make it absolutely clear. State it as though you were reporting an actual happening for a newspaper.

Finally, expand it so as to produce the strongest possible single effect.

2. *What the simple report must contain.* This is the first matter to be settled after the general idea of the story has been hit upon. The writer must fix upon his material before concerning himself with its literary form. Now, this material includes:

a. The circumstances giving rise to the main complication.

b. The persons actively involved in the main complication.

c. The main complication itself.

d. The character trait (if any) which shapes the course of events.

e. The crucial situation (sometimes ambiguously called the climax), in which the consequences of the initial complication reach their highest intensity.

f. The outcome or solution of the crucial situation (sometimes called the dénouement.)

g. The import (or lesson) of the story, if it happens that this is as striking as the events themselves.

To illustrate these contents, look at Kipling's *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*. The generating circumstances of this story are, on the one hand, the alleged Hindu custom of consigning to an open-air prison those who recover from trance and catalepsy; and, on the other hand, Jukes' business visit to a desert

where such a prison was situated, and his falling ill of fever and chasing a wild dog, in his delirium. The persons actively involved in the main complication are Jukes, Gunga Dass, and the sentinel. The main complication is Jukes' tumbling into the horrible village of the officially dead, whence escape seems impossible. The character trait which shapes the course of events is Gunga Dass' greed; his treachery also counts heavily. (But neither actually solves the complication; in other words, this is not a character story.) The crucial situation is that in which Gunga Dass assaults Jukes and leaves him at the quicksand's edge, robbed of the paper which showed the way of escape. The outcome is the arrival of Dunnoo at the edge of the pit, and his rescue of his master. The story has no import or lesson; it is simple adventure. In this respect most stories resemble it; and a very large number depict no important character trait. None of the other five materials, however, are ever wholly absent from a genuine story.

The learner is particularly warned against slurring over the generating circumstances and the character trait. These are commonly neglected, to the reader's distress. Often minute incidents in the opening situation throw much light upon the later course of affairs, and so too do trifling deeds of the hero. It is all too easy to overlook such in the rush of the narrative.

3. *The form of presentation.* We now stand at the threshold of technique. To render the facts of the story is a reporter's task. But reporting is not story-telling. One may tell a truth without casting it into dramatic narrative, and without producing that single effect which is the very soul of the short story. Not all good narrative is drama, nor does all good drama yield a unified impression. But what, now, does fulfil the double ideal of our art?

As has been said, there is no particular mechanical or outward form which all good stories alike assume. There is, though, a small set of principles which are deduced from the double ideal and produce the desired result.

—We have seen that the single effect may be produced either by developing a theme after the fashion of a narrative sermon, or else by stressing one or more of the three factors of the dramatic narrative, namely the character, the complication, or the setting. Now, this means that the effect is not contributed by something apart from the story proper; not by fine descriptions joined to the dramatic narrative, nor by a running fire of aphorisms on the side, nor by any other device save the plot itself. If the effect is produced by the theme, it is produced only in and through the events which demonstrate the theme, as in Hawthorne's *The Great Stone Face*. If it is produced by emphasis of a dramatic factor, it is again the narrative containing this factor that turns the trick. In short, *the two ideals are realized, not by two distinct parts of a story, but in each and every part of it identically*. Their respective expressions are related as are pattern and argument, in prose exposition generally. This relation Stevenson aptly describes thus:

The conjuror juggles with two oranges, and our pleasure in beholding him springs from this, that neither is for an instant overlooked or sacrificed. So with the writer. His pattern, which is to please the supersensual ear, is yet addressed, throughout and first of all, to the demands of logic. Whatever be the obscurities, whatever the intricacies of the argument, the neatness of the fabric must not suffer, or the artist has proved unequal to his design. And on the other hand, no form of words must be selected, no knot must be tied among the phrases, unless knot and word be precisely what is wanted to forward and illuminate the argument; for to fail in this is to



swindle in the game. . . . Pattern and argument live in each other; and it is by the brevity, clearness, charm, or emphasis of the second that we judge the strength and fitness of the first. . . . That style is therefore the most perfect, not, as fools say, which is the most natural in the disjointed babble of the chronicler; but which attains the highest degree of elegant and pregnant implication unobtrusively; or, if obtrusively, then with the greatest gain to sense and vigor. . . .<sup>1</sup>

What argument is to exposition plot is to dramatic narrative; and, less exactly, the single effect corresponds to the pattern. For argument is the logical, and plot the historical or psychological sequence of developing items; and this same sequence, in its influence upon the reader, produces in him the impression of a fabric uniquely definite in texture and hue. This influence has long been called style and has been treated as an independent existence (which it is not). It is merely the dynamic phase of the writer's ideas. It is just as good and just as bad as those ideas; and, what is more to the point, it inhabits the very words and phrases which they do. And the producing of it is identical with the task of selecting and ordering the items of the story that will yield a single dramatic impression. This task I call *integration*.

4. *Integration: what it is not.* Integration, or the working up of parts into a whole, has been overdone in two directions; once toward the ideal of drama, and again toward that of the single effect. In the latter instance, Poe and not a few writers of 'atmosphere' and complication, aiming only to arouse a certain thrill, a particular quality of emotion, have so far succeeded that whatever drama their stories may hold potentially goes lost in the glare of the sensuous explosion. On the other hand, some writers who follow Howells, James,

<sup>1</sup> *On Style in Literature.*

*et al*, subordinate all the elements to the evolution of the leading character. This practice has gained a certain orthodoxy in contemporary story technique. "In a well appointed story," we are told, "not only must everything that happens grow naturally out of the situation, but it must seem to be the only thing that could happen under the circumstances."<sup>1</sup> This is the ideal of that miscalled psychological realism, of recent vogue, whose eyes are fixed only on the play of the inevitable movings in human nature.

Now, all the errors of technique in these two directions are due, not to lack of artistic insight, but to the prior choosing of a too narrow ideal. The artist applies to stories at large the special devices of integration which perfect the kind of story *he* likes to tell; and, finding this is good, he fancies that he has come upon the recipe for all good story telling. The truth is, though, that the short story has no recipe; it has only principles. Its integration is not definable in terms of any single fixed relation between character and action, or situation and climax. And it is not, for the excellent reason that these factors themselves do not sustain a constant relation to one another. In many a complication story, for instance, there is no development of character, and in many a character story the complication is trifling. Therefore what Poe tells us about unifying the complication is, as a universal rule, quite as wrong as what Howells advises us to do by way of focussing upon the inner growth of the hero.

5. *Integration: what it is.* That integration is a principle rather than a formula appears as soon as we inspect the nature of narrative. A moment ago we compared narrative with exposition, pointing out that the latter is knit up according to *logical* principles, and the former according to *psychological* principles. Now,

<sup>1</sup> Charity Dye, *The Story Teller's Art*, 34.

integration in expository writing is nothing more than the selecting and ordering of facts in such manner that they prove the main thesis. Of course, you cannot state the form of their connection in terms of special facts; you cannot say, for instance, that you must begin with generalities and proceed to particular instances, or that your first proposition should hint at the final premise. Far from it! There is only one rule, and that is that the order, as well as the choice, of facts is fixed by the logical effect you wish to produce. And the principle of order and choice is that of *implication*.

Much the same situation occurs in narrative, but with one very important difference. And that difference springs from the fact that the aim of narrative is more various than that of exposition. Exposition aims only to prove. Narrative aims to produce the feeling proper to a given idea. And this feeling varies with the idea; that is, it varies with the matter of fact. But there are many, many feelings; many sentiments, many emotions. This gives us a situation quite different from that in logic, which has at bottom only two types of proof; namely the deductive and the quasi-proof by probability. This difference is very profound, but we cannot here analyze it further, for it would soon carry us far into abstruse philosophy. Accept it as a fact, with the further qualification that, in narrative, the effect is produced by the particular quality of the facts ordered, no less than by their order and choice; whereas in exposition the effect is produced wholly by the logical relation of the data, and is utterly indifferent to their particular quality. Thus, it is all the same to the logical effect whether I prove that A is B by showing that all A is M and all M is B; or by showing that all A is P, and all P is B; or that all A is X and all X is B. The outcome is identical in all cases. Not so in narrative, though. It makes all

the difference in the world to the psychological effect as to the particular events wherewith I may show that Jones is a brave man. I might show it by exhibiting him in the act of defying his wife's request to tend to the furnace; or again by his carrying a cripple out of a burning building. In both instances you might sense his courage, but how unlike your emotions would be!

From all this it follows that, *in order to integrate a given set of items, you must first fix sharply the particular single effect at which you are aiming.* For instance, suppose you wish to write a story about a wife who falls in love with a young friend of her stolid, unkind husband and, for honor's sake, diverts the youth's attention to another woman.<sup>1</sup> This event, in its bald outline, has no single quality. It has many potential qualities. To name only two: it might be posed <sup>so</sup> as to bring out predominantly the animal pliability of the young lover in the wife's hands, in which case the single effect would be comedy, mildly cynical; or again, it might be turned so as to throw into relief the tremendous moral courage of the wife, who, though mismated and wretched, rejects for honor's sake this belated chance of happiness; and with this turn pathos, tragedy, and moral exaltation would stir the reader. Now, is it not clear that the incidents you would choose to tell the story in the first way would not be the incidents which you would pick for the second narrative? And the arrangements would differ too. We commonly say that 'the same event' is either pathetic or tragic or ludicrous; but this is not accurate. It is more accurate to say that an event has many different bearings and relations, and that these latter, taken singly and ex-

<sup>1</sup> This subject has lately been handled with sincerity and charm by Fannie Heaslip Lea, in her story, entitled *Mrs. Kilborn's Sister*. *Harper's*, June, 1912.

hibited apart, are in one case comic, in another tragic, and so on. So it is that, from a series of highly intricate happenings, the writer must select and arrange with an eye to the sentiment or mood he wishes to make dominant.

## SECTION II. INTEGRATIVE INTENSIFIERS

If the remarks of the preceding section are correct, they urge the writer of stories to busy himself with all the materials and relations figuring in his prospective fiction and to seek in each of these the factors, groupings, and qualities which intensify the single effect he is, in the particular case, aiming at. All this is the task of discovering integrators, and it is, I shall maintain, the supreme problem of technique. To it we now address ourselves.

1. *What is intensity?* It is worth while to ask just what this intensity of effect is which the story teller seeks. Singleness of effect is readily comprehended; but I venture to say that few persons know quite what they mean by the adverb when they say, ~~for~~ instance, that a story is 'intensely' pathetic. And yet, in the clear understanding of this one word lies the key to many mysteries of technique. Indeed, I think we may safely say more: it holds the master key. For intensity is the very soul of the short story, distinguishing it from the novel and most lesser forms of prose narrative.

There is at least one characteristic common to all intensities, from that of the simplest sense impression up to that of enjoying Ibsen. *Each of them is the amount of a certain quality cognized in a single instant.* This sounds very abstruse, but it is a fact to which a few simple observations readily lead any one who will take pains to make them. Suppose you listen to a note on a piano, struck now softly

and then loudly. You say, of course, that the second sound is more intense than the first; and, if pressed for the meaning of your judgment, you promptly add that the louder tone, while identical with the softer in pitch, *timbre*, and other qualities, differs from it in that it is somehow 'bigger', or contains more of the pitch and *timbre*. Or, again, look at two lights of precisely the same shade of red, one of which has double the other's brilliancy. Do you not see more red in the brighter? Not a greater area of red, to be sure, but rather more of the red in the same area. We need not ask here how a color can be packed more thickly or thinly. Leave that worry to the physicists and metaphysicians. Enough to observe it is packed, that all other cognizable qualities also are, and that this peculiar condensation is what we call intensity. With these facts in hand, we may look at the more intricate literary instances of the same phenomenon.

Insofar as the artistic effect of a story is concerned, a quality is present to us just as long as its specific feeling-tone lingers in our consciousness, influencing our mood and the course of our thoughts. For it is this feeling-tone and not the full presence of the quality itself, that counts in shaping our impressions. Touching this matter, common speech is quite accurate when it says, of an evil odor or a painful thought or a happy discovery, that 'it stays with us' long after it has gone. The paradox is, like most others, merely verbal; the fact it states is very sure. Things do survive in their own effects.

Hence it is that, at each moment of our lives, a multitude of things experienced in their pristine qualities a long time before is tinging all our sentiments. What these things are and how great their number is, nobody knows; but there is abundant psychological evidence to prove their host is great. The brilliant French philosopher, Bergson, believes that every minutest trifle a man

has ever experienced 'stays with him' throughout his entire life; and this is not so absurd as it first seems. But, once more, we must leave that sort of question to the scientists. The lesser truth is quite enough for us, for it discloses the origin of art's most potent charms. *This origin is in the coming together of many similar things in a single apprehension.*

Each thing sets up its own definite feeling in the person apprehending it; and similar things induce similar feelings. Now let these feelings occur simultaneously, and the result will be precisely that which we note in the brighter light and the louder sound. Each complex impression will contain more of one and the same quality, and this increase will be the quality intensified. Consider the most relevant of instances, fictional narrative, and let us choose the most conspicuously intense specimen of it, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The opening paragraph of this abnormal fantasy forms a single impression, by which I mean that the reader virtually carries it all in mind at once. While reading the last phrases, the effects of the first still vibrate in him with horrible vividness; hence, in his own consciousness, the picture is one and instantaneous. Now, what is there in this picture? What feelings are awakened? Well, there are only two which sweep through the whole of it; insufferable gloom and mystery. And it is the former alone which is intensified with that incredible excess of diabolical skill which places Poe forever in a class by himself. Look away from the larger ideas of the passage; look only at the items. In the first twenty lines, we come upon these words: dull, dark, soundless, autumn, clouds, oppressively, low, alone, dreary, shades of evening, melancholy, insufferable gloom, unrelieved, sternest, desolate, terrible, bleak, vacant, utter depression of soul, hideous, bitter lapse, iciness, sinking, sickening, unredeemed dreariness, goading, tor-

ture. . . . One word in every six throughout the passage thunders the mood with hypnotizing iteration!

Of course, their mere stringing together does not produce intense gloom; but the result comes *when they are all focussed and integrated into one scene or episode which is readily grasped in its unity*. And it is precisely this focussing and integration which Poe has achieved, and toward which every writer with high ideals strives. The learner's duty is to discern those manipulations of form and material which focus, integrate, and thus intensify the single effect of dramatic narrative.

2. *The general rule for intensification.* If intensity is the amount of a given quality *per impression*, the general method of intensifying is therewith revealed. We may state it thus:

*Having chosen the single effect which is to be stressed, the writer must select and report only those features of the characters, the setting and the complication which produce that effect. And, if some features necessary to the coherent telling of the story do not produce the effect, they must be reported as colorlessly as possible, in order that they may not yield an antagonistic impression.*

Here we have, in new guise, the ancient and familiar rule of relevancy. Usually this has been applied chiefly to argumentation, and lately to plot; but it properly governs absolutely every detail of narrative. What its dictates are, we must now inquire.

Every element of a story may, of course, serve to heighten the total effect. But there are five kinds which do so in a superlative degree. They are:

1. *The dominant character.*
2. *The plot action.*
3. *The order of events.*



4. *The point of view*(a) *toward the story (artist's attitude).*(b) *within the story (angle of narration).*5. *The atmosphere.*

These elements demand such extensive analyses that each must be discussed in a separate chapter.

## SUB-CHAPTER A.—THE DOMINANT CHARACTER

In handling this element, we have to bear in mind four rules:

1. *Eliminate every trait and deed which does not help peculiarly to make the character's part in the particular story either intelligible or more open to such sympathy as it merits.*

2. *Do not describe a trait or feature or other peculiarity if it can be portrayed in action that is relevant.*

3. *Paint in only the 'high lights'; that is:*

a. *Never employ a commonplace or merely accurate incident or other detail, if an unusual or acutely characteristic one can be found to depict the same trait equally well.*

b. *Never qualify or elaborate a trait or episode, merely for the sake of preserving the effect of the character's full reality.*

4. *Depict in their true proportion all three phases of conduct, namely, i. sensing the crucial situation, ii. deliberating over its solution, and iii. solving it by decisive action.*

*Comments on these.*

1. This rule of dramatic economy is a result of the peculiar structural limitations of the short story, and marks the latter off most sharply from the novel. Unlike the novelist, the story-teller makes no attempt to give us a panorama of life, in all its perplexing intricacy and fullness. His is the humbler aim, to render some one little scene perfectly. He does not hang together all his impressions, conjectures, and wishes about the world, weld them into a huge *Weltanschauung*, and project them into language in the form of a story about an

imaginary society, as Balzac did. To attempt this through the short story would be as foolish as to try telling the history of the United States in one sentence.

✓ The ultimate reason for the rule is that the short story has no words to spare for non-essentials, and the only essentials in its character drawing are intelligibility and sympathetic portrayal of the one trait which figures dramatically in it.

✓ 2. The second rule is also deduced from the conditions set by the double ideal. It appears most clearly in the character story. The single effect of such a story is produced through the dominant character. Also, this character figures conspicuously in the action. Now, *the intensest effect will be produced if the character, in one and the same deed, both exhibits his own nature relevantly and advances the plot action.* This combination is *the dramatic one par excellence*; and it is powerful, not because it is drama, but because it is intense. And it is intense in that it produces a strong effect per unit impression.<sup>1</sup>

3. The rule of 'high lights' puts the beginner to his severest test. He usually has trouble distinguishing it from the rule of dramatic economy; and, having overcome this difficulty, he encounters still greater ones in practicing the rule. For this, I fear, critics and their text-books are largely to blame, in that they have stressed overmuch the virtues of briefness and simplicity. George Henry Lewes, for instance, makes these the first two of what he calls the five virtues of narrative fiction;<sup>2</sup> Frank Norris urges the young writer to contemplate the wonderful brevity of the Bible 'stories';<sup>3</sup> and Esenwein

<sup>1</sup> Cf. above, on the nature of intensity.

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Success in Literature.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Responsibilities of the Novelist.*

assures him rather vaguely that 'compression must pervade the whole plot.'<sup>1</sup> Did these (and other) writers elsewhere call attention sharply to the nature and technique of significant characterization, all might be well. But they do not. The result is that the learner readily imagines he is delineating character successfully if he says the fewest possible things about his hero, or if, following Esenwein, he "seizes upon a salient characteristic and makes it stand for the whole, leaving the reader to fill in the details from imagination."<sup>2</sup>

a. Unfortunately, 'high lights' may usually be rendered with great brevity and simple speech; and so people, misled by externals, fail to distinguish them from these, their incidental forms of expression. It is easy to show, though, that it is neither brevity nor simplicity of action which brings out character.

Let us suppose that we are to depict the truthfulness of Georgie Washington. We write as follows at the crucial situation:

Mrs. Washington thrust her stately head out of the kitchen window and gazed thoughtfully at her son: "Georgie!" she asked, "have you given the cat her cream yet?" Georgie, in the very act of pouring the thick fluid into Tabby's saucer, looked his mother straight in the eye and answered without a quaver: "Yes, mother! I cannot tell a lie! I have fed the cat."

It is greatly to be feared that historians would not accept this as overwhelming proof that Georgie was constitutionally above all prevarication. And yet, he did tell the truth, didn't he? You observe his veracity in action, don't you? It is simple, brief, and swift, too, isn't it? It therefore possesses the virtues which the literary authorities call for. Evidently, then, these

<sup>1</sup> *Writing the Short Story*.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit., 232.

virtues do not fill the bill. And we see what they lack, the very instant we contrast the above effusion with the classical narrative:

"George!" his father sternly demanded, as he contemplated the prone ruin of his favorite cherry tree, "who chopped this down?"

"Father!" spoke up George firmly and without hesitation, "I cannot tell a lie. I did it with my little hatchet."

Now the youth tells the truth under circumstances which make a white lie much more comfortable and easy. A dilemma confronts him; either he must sacrifice the temporary well-being of certain peripheral nerves or else he must offer up a moral ideal on the altar of hedonism. And his conduct in this crisis shows what manner of lad he is. His character is intelligible and open to our sympathy. Thus the narrative fulfils the first two rules of integration. But the third rule remains to be obeyed. The 'high lights' have not been turned on. The story could scarcely be delivered with intensely dramatic effect. Telling the painful, perilous truth to an angry father reveals a genuine love of truth, but it does not force us to believe that Georgie is the incarnation of probity. It is not inconceivable, we fear, that even such an exemplary youth might swerve from accuracy, for a consideration—say fifty dollars. In other words, the crisis over the cherry tree, genuine and earnest though it is, lacks the gravity necessary to show the hero to be through-and-through truthful. To sketch such a crisis would be to turn on the high lights of dramatic narrative. We should have to see the hero in some desperate predicament, where truth telling would jeopardize his dearest, deepest wish or his whole future. And he should clearly sense this danger, tremble before it, and yet tell the truth.

✓ Let us put the matter in another way. It is not

enough to show a character doing something *consistent* with that trait which you seek to exhibit. The merely consistent deed does not persuade. And the reason for this lies underneath art; it is imbedded in the nature of things. The merely consistent act, of itself, is logically incapable of proving character. Logically, I say. And it can be demonstrated, thus:

The truthful man *always* tells the truth even to his own injury.

Georgie *once* told the truth and thereby injured himself.

Conclusion: None.

You see now, I trust, why a random consistent deed is unconvincing. Once is not always. Therefore, in order that we may be persuaded that he will always do so, *we must witness him telling the truth under circumstances which make the same habit easy and natural for him under all other circumstances*. If a man tells the truth when doing so costs him a dollar loss, he may not do so when it costs him a hundred. But if he does it when it costs him a hundred, we are sure that he will do it when it costs him only a dollar. This is no subtle esthetic principle peculiar to artistic technique. It is plain common sense, as most other principles will turn out to be, once we have carefully analyzed them.

Finally, the necessity for 'high lights' is strengthened by the fact that *the quality of the information we have about a person tends to penetrate and fuse with the image of the person which we build up out of this information*. If we know only petty facts about a man, the man is in danger of appearing petty to us, even though the facts do not imply such a character. For instance, were you to say that Roosevelt's teeth gleam as large and as numerous as the tombstones of his political enemies, your hearers would never quite rid themselves of this de-

scription. And whoever learned only such trifles would frame a picture of an insignificant, ridiculous, or contemptible person.

In this, once more, there is nothing strange. We judge people in the light of what we know about them. That is the whole secret, the only secret. It is because of this alone that one may damn with faint praise. It is because of this alone that the bravest and noblest may easily be made to seem ordinary and even despicable not by lies but by small truths. Washington flirted scandalously with servant girls, Lincoln was at times foul-mouthed, Thomas Aquinas was a glutton; and so, by citing such facts, it is easy for any shallow iconoclast to make his dupes believe these great men were of the commonest clay. And this possibility becomes a peril to the literary artist who thinks only of accuracy and consistent character drawing.

The artistic material is that which persuades; and the persuasive is not the merely true or consistent, but rather the acutely characteristic, namely that which unequivocally reveals a nature which can be counted on to be constant under all circumstances. The discovery of such decisive marks is almost a science by itself, a science moreover in which few are versed. Do you know what is the sure test of a coward? Or of a spoiled child? Or of a dreamer? Or of a hypocrite? Or of a cruel man? Or of a flirt? Or of a saint? Can you describe a situation in which any one of these characters discloses itself past all misunderstanding? If so, you can write a powerful short story.

b. The second rule of 'high lights' is little more than a corollary of the first. Young writers are steeped in the superstition that, for reality's sake, they must explain who the hero's grandparents were, how he came to live in the town, why he went to work in the shirt factory,

where he first met his beloved, and all the other incidents prior to the climax. The sufficient answer to this misbelief has been given: most of those episodes are petty, in comparison with the plot, and hence, if told, will inevitably dilute the latter woefully; and, secondly, they are not characteristic of any trait that develops in the plot, and hence do not persuade the reader of anything in particular.

(4) The last rule of character drawing, to which we now come, is by all odds the most important. It is also the one which demands, for its understanding, the maturest insight. Merely to explain it is to write a short Essay on Man.

a. *The mark of human nature.* Philosophers used to say that the soul of man was a trinity, whose members were feeling, intellect, and will. Each, said they, was ultimate, irreducible, and unique. Feeling was not a kind of thinking, nor was thinking a species of volition. For all their difference, however, all three faculties worked in wonderful unison; and the problem of life was the problem of balancing their activities.

Modern science discards this pretty scheme, but it preserves its truth. (Today we recognize that man is an organism which adjusts itself in many manners to vicissitudes, and that *what marks him off most sharply from all other animals is his reflective foresight.*) The ape has feelings, and the ape acts; but between his feelings and his conduct there is little or no control. The creature does not check and postpone his impulsive responses, in order to consider whether they will redound to his own future good. Nor does he seek out the consequences of an impending act and anticipate its pleasure or pain. But this is the very gist of human life. Insofar as a man acts on impulse, he is not exhibiting the power which distinguishes him from lower animals. Of course, he may



be a man in a purely zoological sense, even though he habitually fails to ponder and look ahead; just as he might be a biped, though paralyzed in both legs. But he would *impress* nobody as human. We should say of him: "What a brute!" And the epithet would not be poetic license, but sober fact.

*Now, when we speak of character, we refer to just this same reflective foresight in its actual operations.* There is no difference between human character and the characteristically human. To be sure, the former phrase is often used eulogistically, whereas the latter has a cold, scientific sound; but this is a mere accident of language. It is impossible to lay a finger upon a quality which is included within the one and not within the other. Digesting meat is not a power of human character, for it is not characteristically human. Singing is not an affair of human character, for larks and cuckoos sing. Having feelings and emotions is not a sign of human character for certainly dogs and cats fall into a panic, know jealousy, and there runs through some of them even a queer little shred of loyalty.

b. *Analysis of character.* Let us analyze briefly the conduct of one endowed with this unique reflective foresight. We find that there are three stages in it. First, a man finds himself in a situation which makes trouble for him; and he must sense this trouble feelingly. He may be thwarted in a desire, or brought into pain. Secondly, he plans to escape the difficulty; and, in planning, he looks ahead to the probable outcome of each project which he considers. Against his private wishes he weighs the effects of gratifying them. Against the demands of other people he sets what he deems to be his rights. Against his own bad habits he arrays his better knowledge. Having done this, he finishes off the affair with a decisive act. And it is this act which, when judged in the

light of the circumstances, reveals the precise degree and quality of control which the man's reflective mind exercises over his career. The character of *this* man is nothing more nor less than the management of just these inter-playing impulses, appetites, feelings, foresights, and arguments. In his adjustment of these forces, he shows himself as in no other way.<sup>1</sup>

Let us call these three stages of rational behavior respectively the *immediate response* to the difficulty, the *reflective delay*, and the *active solution*. We may now state a little more formally the fundamental fact about them which gives form and body to the whole technique of character drawing:

*Character, being the particular proportion and relation of these three activities, is not determined by any one or two of them. Hence, to depict it unambiguously, all three must be shown in their particular relation under the given circumstances.*<sup>2</sup>

Or, to put the case more bluntly; the finest analysis of a hero's emotions and yearnings will not tell us decisively what manner of man he is, nor will his thoughts do so, nor will his deeds alone. To demonstrate this and at the same time to show that perfect character drawing involves the three-phase integration just described, I shall cite a few passages from Maupassant's little masterpiece, *A Coward*, which the student should carefully review at this point.

The three phases here are very obvious. The insult passed to the viscount's guests gives rise at once to the dramatic difficulty, and to this difficulty the viscount

<sup>1</sup>For an exhaustive analysis of this performance, read John Dewey's *How We Think* and Dewey and Tufts' *Ethics* (Henry Holt, 1908); especially chapters 3 and 10 of the latter book.

<sup>2</sup>An important qualification of this rule will soon be noted; cf. 112.

responds immediately. This response gives rise to a further complication, the challenge. Then begins the reflective delay, during which the viscount's impulses, feelings, notions of propriety, anticipations, and unsuspected physical reactions fight among themselves for the control of the decisive solution of his difficulty. At the height of their battle, one wins; and the act comes in a twinkling. Here are some illuminating incidents from each phase:

*The immediate response.*

The young woman continued, half smiling, half vexed: 'It is very unpleasant. That man is spoiling my ice.'

The husband shrugged his shoulders: 'Pshaw! Don't pay any attention to him. . . .'

The viscount had risen abruptly. He could not suffer that stranger to spoil an ice which he had offered. . . . He walked toward the man and said: 'You have a way of looking at those ladies, monsieur, which I cannot tolerate. I beg you to be so kind as to stare less persistently.' . . . The gentleman answered but one word, a foul word. . . . Profound silence ensued. Suddenly a sharp sound cracked in the air. The Viscount had slapped his adversary. Everyone rose to interfere. Cards were exchanged between the two.

*The reflective delay.*

When the viscount had returned to his apartment, he paced the floor for several minutes with great, quick strides. He was too much agitated to reflect. A single thought hovered over his mind—'a duel'—without arousing any emotion whatsoever. . . . Then he sat down and began to consider. He must find seconds in the morning. Whom should he choose? . . . He discovered that he was thirsty, and he drank three glasses of water in rapid succession. Then he resumed his pacing of the floor. He felt full of energy. If he blustered a little, seemed determined to carry the thing through, demanded rigorous and dangerous conditions, insisted upon a serious duel, very serious and terrible, his adversary would probably back down and apologize.

• He picked up the card. . . . 'Georges Lamil, 51 Rue Moncey.' Nothing more. He examined these assembled letters, which seemed to him mysterious, full of vague meaning. Georges Lamil! Who was this man? What was his business? Why had he stared at the lady in such a way? . . . There arose within him a fierce anger against that bit of paper—a malevolent sort of rage blended with a strange feeling of discomfort. What a stupid business! He took a penknife that lay open to his hand and stuck it through the middle of the printed name, as if he were stabbing some one.

*The active solution.*

So he was really going to fight! It was no longer possible for him to avoid it. What on earth was taking place within him? He wanted to fight; his purpose and determination to do so were firmly fixed; and yet he knew full well that, despite all the effort of his mind and all the tension of his will, he would be unable to retain even the strength necessary to take him to the place of meeting.

From time to time his teeth chattered with a little dry noise. He tried to read, and took up Chateauvillard's duelling code . . . .

As he passed a table, he opened the case by Gastinne Renette, took out one of the pistols, and then stood as if he were about to fire, and raised his arm. But he was trembling from head to foot, and the barrel shook in all directions.

Then he said to himself: 'It is impossible. I cannot fight like this!'

He regarded the little hole, black and deep, at the end of the barrel, the hole that spits out death. He thought of the dishonor, of the whispered comments at the clubs, of the laughter in the salons, of the disdain of the women,

• He continued to gaze at the weapon, and, as he raised the hammer, he saw the priming glitter beneath it like a little red flame. . . . And he experienced a confused, inexplicable joy thereat.

If he did not display in the other's presence the calm and noble bearing suited to the occasion, he would be lost forever. . . . And that calm and bold bearing

he could not command—he knew it, he felt it. And yet he was really brave, because he wanted to fight! He was brave, because—The thought that grazed his mind was never completed; opening his mouth wide, he suddenly thrust the barrel of the pistol into the very bottom of his throat and pressed the trigger. . . .

So closely does Maupassant cling to the pure psychological truth here that many readers find the marvelous little story bald and hard. There is no sympathy in it; if it leads you to feel sorry for the poor viscount, it does so by its brute facts, not by any persuasion from the author. But it is just this crystalline accuracy that makes *A Coward* a perfect model for students to contemplate. The phases of character expansion are as sharply limned, the one from its next, as the acts of a play.

Let us see how the story would have worked out, had Maupassant neglected some phase. Suppose, first of all, that he had not told us anything definite about the viscount's immediate response to the provoking situation. Well, that would have virtually halted the telling of the tale; for it was the viscount's spontaneous resentment of the stranger's impudence that brought on the challenge. Not to tell what the viscount did would rob the story of the very incident which sets it going. This is not an accidental complication of this particular plot. It occurs in all stories of character, in greater or less degree. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that its occurrence brings the character intimately into the plot action and so makes a character story. In this case the immediate response belongs to the narrative by definition.

Now suppose that Maupassant had told us all about the encounter in the restaurant and also about the viscount's suicide, but not a word about his wonderings and waverings, his strange access of panic, his half-crazed dreams about the outcome of his grim misad-

venture, his schemes to rob it of its peril. What then of the story? To answer this question, you have only to read the original, omitting the passages which sketch the reflective delay. So manipulated, the events shrink to a mere episode not a little obscure. A diner who stares at the viscount's guests is asked to mind his manners. He retorts insultingly, and the viscount slaps him. The duel is arranged, the viscount chooses his weapon and his seconds. The latter call on him, settle the details of the contest, and go. A few minutes later, his valet rushes in, alarmed by the report of a gun, and finds him dead; and beside him on the table a paper bearing only these four words: 'this is my Will'.

That is a mystery story, isn't it? And an ill-hung one too, for it does not solve the puzzle of the viscount's suicide. What has happened, anyhow? The viscount is plainly a bold, firm man. Did he not walk straight up to the insulter in the restaurant? Did he not accept the fellow's card? Did he not insist upon the most serious form of duel? Did his seconds not find him calm? Well, then! there's something behind all this affair, something dark and wicked! Perhaps Georges Lamil was the prodigal brother of the viscount's guest, and the lady begged the viscount to break off the duel and save her family from notoriety. Perhaps the fellow was a hired assassin—or maybe the affair was all a hoax, to test the viscount's courage, and the viscount, discovering it, was humiliated.

Or—but there are as many guesses as there are readers, and every one of them remains unsubstantiated. We shall never know whether the viscount was a hero or a coward or the victim of persecution or the butt of a ghastly practical joke or something else.

Finally, suppose that Maupassant had said nothing about the viscount's consummating deed. Suppose the story had ended at the point where the man, having

picked up a pistol and aimed it across the room, found himself trembling from head to foot, and then cried: "It is impossible. I cannot fight like this!" Surely the story would now be mutilated less than in either of the preceding cases. We should at least perceive the viscount's physical cowardice, and we should conjecture that he withdrew from the duel and was disgraced thereby. But we should not be absolutely sure that he was as weak as he felt himself to be, nor that he did not walk into the duel, when the appointed hour came, no less firmly than he approached his insulter in the restaurant. And why shouldn't we? Simply because we know that a man's feelings and emotions are not the infallible weather-vanes of conduct. They are peculiarly untrustworthy symptoms of bravery and cowardice. The most courageous hero, for instance, is not the man who does not know fear. Such a fellow is a dolt, whereas he who commands our admiration is the one who, being wracked with thoughts of the danger before him, nevertheless nerves himself to meet it. So too with the coward. It is not what he feels that shows him up; it is what he does after reflection. However ill the thought of an approaching duel may make him, that does not brand him. But let him dodge the consequences of the accepted challenge; let him flee not only his adversary but even the painful gossip that his behavior will bring down upon him, and there you have the finished and unmistakable type.

We have sketched the elementary pattern of human conduct, but we have not indicated the source nor the nature of its perpetual novelty and immeasurable variety. A profitable study of these would carry us far beyond the purposes of this book, so I shall merely suggest a few leading facts which the writer of character stories must keep in mind.

The profoundest difference between man and man ap-

pears in the balance and magnitude of forces at work during the reflective delay. In this stage of the dramatic struggle the battle is doubtless fought and won, though the victory does not appear to the observer—nor, often enough, to the man himself—until the decisive act has been consummated. Now, the palm is awarded to one of three contestants:<sup>1</sup> to impulse, to feeling, or to reason. And the particular manner in which the victorious force gains the ascendancy gives us insight into the soul of the particular man. In *A Coward* this three-cornered contest is beautifully clear. Consider this passage, which is typical of the entire story:

"I must be firm," he said. "He will be afraid." (*Reasoning.*) The sound of his voice made him tremble, and he looked about him. (*Feeling, followed by an impulse.*) He drank another glass of water, then began to undress for bed. (*Impulse.*) . . . He thought: "I have all day tomorrow to arrange my affairs. I must sleep now, so that I may be calm." (*Reasoning.*) He was very warm under the bed clothes, but he could not manage to doze off. . . . He was still very thirsty. (*Feeling.*) He got up again to drink. (*Impulse.*) Then a disquieting thought occurred to him: "Can it be that I am afraid?"

Why did his heart begin to beat wildly at every familiar sound in the room? (*Reasoning.*)

Notice how each power tries in turn to master the viscount, and how your own interest centres about the steady, insidious onrush of the purely physical collapse and the last desperate stand which the poor man's reason makes against it. It is in just such conflicts that the character story has its being.

<sup>1</sup> The reader versed in psychology will please skim this description with an indulgent eye. It is a rough outline of the truth. For pedagogy's sake, I trust that it is permissible to speak of impulse, feeling, and reason as though they were independent entities, instead of interlocking processes.



The reader will easily observe that the three factors of this conflict resemble more or less those of the wider situation wherein reflective delay is the second phase. The immediate response is commonly rich in emotional flavor; the reflective delay itself is essentially rational, even though reason does not always win out; and the active solution is inevitably impulsive in some degree, just because it is an act of will. This parallelism is not a freak of nature; any psychologist will explain more clearly than is here possible how this circumstance is due to the very nature of the reflective delay, which is, as I have said, nothing but the arena wherein all the forces of human nature meet in combat. For us, however, the literary aspect of the fact is more significant. Briefly, it is this:

*The pattern, or static structure, of a character can be adequately depicted by the interplay of forces within the reflective delay. But the proof of the pattern, the full dramatic evidence of its existence and power in the particular person, appears in the active solution that follows the reflective delay.*

This is a very important qualification of the rule laid down above.<sup>1</sup> And it has a bearing upon the most modern, most highly praised mode of fiction, the so-called 'psychological story'.

The psychological story is one which analyzes the feelings, thoughts, and impulses of its leading characters more minutely than does the ordinary dramatic story, which is content to describe only as much as might normally appear to the eye and ear of a possible spectator. In another chapter we shall discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the analytical technique;<sup>2</sup> at present let us note only the danger of substituting analysis for

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the section on point of view.

drama. This is a very real peril today, though perhaps less so than in the eighties, when Henry James was heralded as the discoverer of the real and the ultimate in literature. At bottom the danger is precisely the one which we have suggested in the above inspection of Maupassant's story. *It is the danger of letting the thought do duty for the deed*; that is, substituting for the real course of events the hero's stream of consciousness. To explain this substitution, we must make another brief but arduous excursion into psychology.

Nature is nowhere more prodigal than in mental life. She produces millions more little fish than can ever survive in the sea; and she gives birth to hundreds of millions of sensations, feelings, and imageries which can never develop and become dominant in the directing of men's lives. You become aware of this, the instant you observe accurately what is going on in your mind. Swift, evanescent, and immeasurably complex is the flux; and its items of an instant baffle the acutest introspective cataloguer. Now, this fact is, of itself, enough to prove that, *when we think about a certain matter, we do not think in terms of these elusive and microscopical 'mental states'*. These are, on the contrary, nothing more than our manipulations in adjusting ourselves to the situation which concerns us. They bear the same relation to thinking as the tugging of a slack-wire walker's muscles do to the task of keeping his balance. *They are responses to the conditions of the pressing problem; they are neither the conditions nor the character which responds.*

The literary artist, though, is interested in the dramatic aspect of human conduct, not in the mechanism of its activity. The latter falls to the professional scientist; to the psychological expert and the physiologist. Its truthful portraiture affords no greater opportunity for fine narrative writing than does an account of the slack-

wire walker's muscle play.<sup>1</sup> As Aristotle saw, the objects of the artist are always 'men in action'. But a gush of 'mental states' is no more a man in action than a series of writhings is. Action may be the result of many sensations and writhings; but, even then, it has a singleness, a direction, and a purpose which these, its mechanical factors, altogether lack. We are nearer to human conduct when we see Smith knock down a hoodlum who has insulted him than we are when a scientific observer enumerates to us the fifty-seven varieties of naughty thoughts which the insult sent flitting through Smith's consciousness. To be sure, we are not thus brought to an understanding of conduct, if by understanding we mean a knowledge of causes. But it is not the artist's business to furnish that. He is asked to sketch only the broad movement and tread in their decisive and illuminating manifestations. The single effect, the impressive unity of somebody's behavior, is his ideal; and, to render this, *he must abstain from making perceptible in the action what is imperceptible to the ordinary competent observer; and from making dramatically conspicuous what has little or no efficiency.* For of just this succession of visible and crucial events does dramatic action consist.

Dangerous as are most analogies between the arts, I cannot resist comparing the writings of the extreme psychological school to the Dutch microscopical paintings. Those freakish little canvases on which we see every mesh of a fly's wing and every individual hair in the down of a peach betray a confusion of science with art in their maker's mind. The correct aim of the painter

<sup>1</sup> The difference between scientific and artistic writing here indicated is absolute. It springs from a difference in aims. But this does not mean that scientific writing must be inartistic in the sense of being obscure and clumsy.

is to present some visible aspect of some real or imaginary object. He is free to omit much that is visible, if by so doing he vivifies significantly the remainder, as Corot does with the blues and grays and Rembrandt with the browns and yellows. But he has no right to introduce the invisible. This the Dutch microscopist does though when he inserts into the scene, not what men perceive of the fly and the peach but what wing and down 'really' are. The result must have bewildered the good man, for it is singularly dead and unreal to the eye. You might fancy that Alice would have seen the like of it, had she gone through a magnifying glass instead of through the looking glass. His fly and peach are not of our world.

Precisely this effect is all too easily produced in fiction by elaborately conscientious analysis of the hero's consciousness. The reader is forced to notice many minute impressions and impulses which neither mould nor advance the action at all and hence do not truly characterize, but only blur, the significance of the portrayed conduct.

There is another serious misunderstanding about the so-called 'psychological story' which mars at times even the writings of veterans. I have wondered to what extent we ought to put the blame of it upon the lexicographer who defines 'psychological' as meaning 'of or pertaining to the human soul and its operations'. Certainly it is just this loose, all-inclusive notion which confuses technique. A story would, according to it, be psychological if it 'pertained' in any way to somebody's 'mental states'. And so many writers fancy themselves dipping deep into the abysses of the soul when they write as follows: 'It flashed across her troubled mind', 'on his mental horizon a black doubt arose', 'a pang of regret

smote him', 'the lad wondered long, weighing all the direful possibilities of his thought', and so on.

Such allusions, though, do not make literature psychological. They are as powerless to do that as loud curses and piercing shrieks are powerless to make an adventure story. Curses and shrieks are merely the *effects* of some adventurous encounter; and, being such, they may aid in expressing its poignancy. Indicating somebody's reaction to the adventure, they come to indicate by indirection the quality of the adventure itself. They hint at a character's point of view toward the latter. And this is all that is accomplished by the mental horizons, pangs, wondering, and weighing on mental scales about which pseudo-psychological writers amplify. They tell a story by telling us how its episodes impress some witness or participant.

Now, it often happens that the episodes themselves are no more psychological than a thunderstorm or the flight of a bird. The hero may be caught in a jam on the Subway, or the heroine be spattered with mud by a passing automobile. Furthermore, it may be that the crowd of travelers or the racing chauffeur figures in the action of the story, while the hero's sensations and the heroine's thoughts do not. In such a case, the reader's attention need not be drawn to these mental states, except insofar as they alone can make clear the relevant happenings.

The genuine psychological story uses 'mental states' in a different way. They are not its *language*; they are its *subject matter*. The working of some human trait is depicted, as any simple adventure or love affair might be. Maupassant's *A Piece of String*, Henry James' *The Liar*, and Mrs. Wharton's *The Daunt Diana* typify this undertaking. The first shows us, in their tragic interaction, the deeds of an over-shrewd miser who cherishes his reputation and of his neighbors who deal

lightly with it. The second portrays an incorrigible drawer of the long bow. The third exhibits the acquisitive passion and its paradoxical end. Such material seldom demands the false psychological manner; its narrative can flow along as objectively as a newspaper report, and so it often does. Unfortunately, though, it often does not; and its failure is nowhere more conspicuous than in some of Howells' stories.

Howells analyzes human nature's milder moods and appetites with sympathetic accuracy; and when he does, he produces a sincere, convincing psychological story, albeit generally a tame one. But, unfortunately, he has associated the psychological manner and language with whatever material he writes about; and when the latter is not psychological, the resulting narrative suffers. The opening of *A Circle in the Water* mingles the psychological manner with the psychological material. The former appears at the very outset:

The sunset struck its hard red light through the fringe of leafless trees to the westward, and gave their outlines that black definition *which a French school of landscape saw a few years ago, and now seems to see no longer*. In the whole scene there was the pathetic repose *which we feel* in some dying day of the dying year, and a sort of impersonal melancholy weighed me down as I dragged myself through the woods toward that dreary November sunset.

Presently I came in sight of the place I was seeking, and *partly because of the insensate pleasure of having found it*, and partly because of the cheerful opening in the boscage made by the pool, which cleared its space to the sky, *my heart lifted*. *I perceived* that it was not so late as *I had thought*, and that there was much more of the day left than *I had supposed* from the crimson glare in the west. . . .

The phrases of this passage which I have italicized do not describe the scene directly, nor do they turn us toward

some other part of the story proper. They help to give us a distinct feeling for the mildly dreary autumnal hour, by telling us *that* somebody was contemplating the sunset, and *what* he felt. The narrator's reminiscences and emotions are of no account in the drama; they merely assist—or are supposed to assist—in lighting up the stage. Notice how easily we may cut them out. Smoothing over the gaps, we get something like this:

The sunset struck its hard red light through the fringe of leafless trees to the westward, and gave their outline a black definition. In the whole scene there was the pathetic repose of a dying day in the dying year; and the impersonal melancholy of it weighed me down as I dragged myself through the November woods.

Presently I came in sight of the place I was seeking; a cheerful opening in the boscage made by the pool, which cleared its space to the sky. There was more of the day left than the crimson glare in the west betrayed . . . etc.

Let the student ask himself whether, in this briefer, purely objective report, any feature of the original scene has gone lost. I think he will find none missing; and if he does, it is through my faulty abridging and not because of the changed point of view. The truth is, very few events that are visible or audible can be made known to readers more vividly through the reporter's 'mental states' than by means of the bald, common, and obvious qualities, manners and consequences of the objective items themselves. Indeed, the 'mental state' generally turns out to be a pure redundancy, as it is in the above passage. When Howells says that in the sunset there was the repose *which we feel* in a dying day, the allusion to the feeling is gratuitous. For everybody knows that repose is something which we feel; and to mention the fact in finished prose is pretty much like saying 'the color red which we see in the rose', when one means 'the red of

the rose' or 'rose-red'. Or, again, to say: 'I perceived that it was not so late as I had thought', *when the fact of perceiving makes no difference to the story*, is not only less elegant, but less true dramatically than to say: 'It was not so late as I had thought.' Such psychological mannerisms only divert the reader from the plot to the narrator, and to that extent falsify the total impression.<sup>1</sup>

Not so, however, with the genuine psychological narrative whose material is, both by intent and by full dramatic right, the world of 'mental states'. When the narrator of Howells' story flings himself down 'on one of the grassy gradines of the amphitheatre' and muses over the mysterious antiquity of the place, he sees not the slightest impulse 'of the life that the thing inarticulately recorded.'

I began to think how everything ends at last. Love ends, sorrow ends, and to our mortal sense everything that is mortal ends. . . . Was evil then a greater force than good in the moral world? I tried to recall personalities, virtuous and vicious, and I found a fatal want of distinctness in the return of those I classed as virtuous, and a lurid vividness in those I classed as vicious. Images, knowledges, concepts, zigzagged through my brain, as they do when we are thinking, or believe we are thinking; perhaps there is no such thing as we call thinking, except when we are talking. . . .

<sup>1</sup> The first italicized clause in the opening of *A Circle in the Water* (117) may seem far removed from a psychological mannerism. To compare the outline of autumnal trees to the effects achieved some years ago by certain French painters is, one might insist, a sober historical allusion. But I would urge that it is this only in appearance. Really it is a private reminiscence, as obscure as it is private. It is a random association, and the pictures which the landscape suggested to the author have been neither seen nor heard of by most readers. The comparison is therefore meaningless to most of us. In effect, it is as though Howells had written: "The sunset . . . gave their outline a black definition which awoke in me the memory of something done by a French school . . . etc". Thus revised, the psychological mannerism of it protrudes.



These reflections and the peculiar flicker of mind that accompany them are dramatically perfect. They are not dragged in to describe something else. They are made known for their own sake and because they count in the story. It is this very doubt about the permanence of the good and the transiency of evil which is going to work itself out in the encounter with Tedham. Indeed, to the careful reader, it appears the deeper, more universal topic, of which Tedham's adventures are only a dramatic exemplification. The difference, therefore, between it and the 'I thought's', 'I felt's', and 'I perceived's' of the first quoted passage is not one of degree; it is a difference of logical and dramatic kind. Never can the one be reduced to the other.

## EXERCISES

1. Find the single effect of Kipling's *In Flood Time* (in *Black and White*). Then analyze the six paragraphs of the introduction, separating the items of character, complication, and setting. Now point out those which heighten the single effect and those which do not.

2. Does the opening description of setting and characters (first nine paragraphs) of Mary Wilkins Freeman's *A Far-Away Melody* (in *A Humble Romance*) heighten the single effect of the story? If not, specify in what respects it fails.

3. Answer the above questions with regard to Maupassant's *The Piece of String* (first five paragraphs).

4. In O. Henry's *Lost on Dress Parade* do you find any character trait or deed which does not make Mr. Towers Chandler's part in the story intelligible or open to such sympathy as it merits? If so, designate it precisely.

5. In Margaret Deland's *Good for the Soul* (*Old Chester Tales*) is any character trait or feature described which might be more vividly portrayed in direct action? If so, designate it.

6. Can you suggest less commonplace incidents for the depicting of Langbourne's eager curiosity in Howells' *The Magic of a Voice* (in *A Pair of Patient Lovers*)?

7. In Mary Wilkins Freeman's *A Modern Dragon* (in *A Humble Romance*) is any character trait elaborated beyond the demands of the story?

8. Point out the three phases of the leading character's conduct in each of the following stories, and state which of them, if any, the author has either overdrawn or underdrawn:

- a. Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*.
- b. George Moore's *The Exile* (in *The Untilled Field*).
- c. Kipling's *The Phantom 'Rickshaw*.

9. a. Pick out some trait in the following character. Find a crucial situation in the events narrated which may exhibit that trait. Then work up a plot around it, drawing on the given material as much or as little as you please.

b. Get a character story out of the last sentence in the news item.

Ross Raymond, author, war correspondent, and adventurer, of whom it has been said he was in a palace one day and a prison the next, died in Carson, Nev., on Thanksgiving Day.

Raymond's right name was Frank Powers, and Beaver, Penn., was the place of his birth. At different times Raymond declared that he was the son of a well-known officer of the British Army, that he was an ex-officer of the British Navy, with a long and honored career behind him, and that among his friends were some of the foremost men and women of this country, England, and continental Europe.

Raymond may be said to have begun his varied career by entering the United States Navy. After serving a time he resigned and then entered the British Navy, and after a tour of duty in that service resigned to become a correspondent of newspapers. As a correspondent he represented in various parts of the world newspapers in San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore, London, and this city. He traveled the world over, and it is said was one day in poverty and the next day in luxury.

At one time Raymond was on the staff of a powerful Indian Rajah, while at the time of the bombardment of Alexandria he was an officer on the staff of the Khédive of Egypt. After his Egyptian career he is charged with having impersonated many distinguished men, and for these false pretensions he served ten years in an English

prison, and is said also to have served a term in prison in this country.

As the press agent of the Khédive Raymond cut a wide swath. After the Egyptian war he went to Paris, clad in the glittering uniform of an Egyptian officer and surrounded by a full staff of equally gorgeously clad Egyptian subordinates. He announced at the time that the Khédive was soon to visit Paris, and engaged whole floors in great hotels for the entertainment of that personage. He had trays of rarest gems sent to him for inspection, which he is said to have retained pending the approval of the purchase by the Khédive. Then he disappeared.

When next heard of he was masquerading as a Rajah in India. He had a great time in India, and then he came back to the United States, and going to Ohio learned that his mother was dead. Then he went West. *His wife stuck to him through it all.*

10. What character trait does G.'s conduct suggest in the following episode from the *Titanic* disaster? If you find it equivocal, add such events as will make it clear.

When the crash came I awakened them and told them to get dressed. A few minutes later I went into their rooms and helped them to get ready. I put a life preserver on Mr. G. He said it hurt him in the back. There was plenty of time and I took it off, adjusted it, and then put it on him again. It was all right this time.

They wanted to go out on deck with only a few clothes on, but I pulled a heavy sweater over Mr. G.'s lifebelt, and then they both went out. They stayed together, and I could see what they were doing. They were going from one lifeboat to another, helping the women and children. Mr. G. would shout out, 'Women first,' and he was of great assistance to the officers.

Things weren't so bad at first, but when I saw Mr. G. about three-quarters of an hour after the crash there was great excitement. What surprised me was that both Mr. G. and his secretary were dressed in their evening clothes. They had deliberately taken off their sweaters, and as nearly as I can remember they wore no lifebelts at all.

'What's that for?' I asked.

'We've dressed up in our best,' replied Mr. G., 'and are prepared to go down like gentlemen.' It was then that he told me about the message to his wife and that is what I have come here for.

Well, shortly after the last few boats were lowered and I was ordered by the deck officer to man an oar, I waved good-bye to Mr. G., and that was the last I saw of him and his American secretary.

11. a. What character traits are at work in the following history? Which one seems to have been decisive? Having answered these questions, simplify the events so as to bring out nothing but the one most important trait.

b. Can either character be made the topic of a short story, without profoundly altering the events?

The woman who was found insane on Monday afternoon in the room of Prof. Louis G. Parma, beside the dead body of the music master, was identified yesterday as Clara Conner of Shelbyville, Ind., a former pupil of the professor.

Prof. Parma kept Miss Conner in seclusion for twenty years, providing for her every want and supporting her entirely at his expense, that she might not be sent to an insane asylum. The old professor had a horror of such institutions, and when Miss Connor, one of his most promising pupils and a great favorite with the music master, lost her reason, he proclaimed to his friends that never should the girl, without near relatives or apparently any kin at all except a cousin, be committed to an asylum.

Prof. Parma was wealthy then. Miss Conner had come to his school from her home in Shelbyville and from the first she made rapid progress. She hoped to win a place on the stage, and the professor predicted a great future for her. Then her mind gave way.

Prof. Parma was broken-hearted, but instantly provided a place in his own home for the girl. To strangers he never spoke of her, but to his and her friends the

professor never made a mystery of the girl's presence in his home. He regarded her affliction as a secret of hers, and for this reason only he refused to mention her to strangers.

The doctors in Bellevue Hospital can get nothing coherent from the woman. In her babblings she has talked in at least seven different languages, but never connectedly enough to give the authorities any clue to her past.

12. Develop the following into a half-serious character story, first designating the single effect, the character trait, and the crucial situation.

Willie Finnegan, 12 years old, and Freddie Rosenberg, 10 years old, today became tired of a short career as thieves and applied to the police to send them to the reform school.

The boys a few nights ago tried to steal the opera house bass drum. Next they robbed John P. Flanagan's grocery store, and last night stole bottled beer from a wagon. They drank some of the beer and today felt remorse.

The police turned the boys over to Probation Officer MacWilliam, and Judge Lyon sent them to the reform school in Jamesburg.

13. Read carefully Howells' *The Pursuit of the Piano*. Then strike out from the first chapter every word which describes an event or circumstance by recounting Hamilton Gaite's sensations or thoughts about it. Be very careful not to expunge anything that counts in the dramatic action. Finally, connect smoothly the surviving passages and compare the result with the original with respect to (a) vividness, (b) clarity, and (c) dramatic velocity.

## SUB-CHAPTER B. THE PLOT ACTION.

Important as the plot action is, it makes almost no demand upon the writer's knowledge or insight, in comparison with the integrative intensifier which we have just been studying. To handle it effectively, little technical skill is required. It raises only two questions worthy of discussion here: the question of *directness*, and the question of *necessity*.

1. *Directness*. Let us first define our terms. Action is direct which, in every complication, moves toward the crucial situation. Every other kind is indirect in greater or lesser degree.

These qualities of plot action must be carefully distinguished from the order of events, with which it is easy to confuse them. The plot action is determined by the *selection* of events to be depicted; the order of the selected events, while more or less influenced by the selection, is a distinct and secondary feature. Almost any story will reveal this distinction, but Balzac's *A Seashore Drama* does so with exceptional sharpness. The student will please analyze it carefully, in the light of the following comments.

The plot action here is doubly indirect. It begins with the reveries and gamboling of the artist narrator and Pauline on the Brittany coast, and through the first thousand words these persons seem to be the chief characters. Then the wretched fisherman suddenly appears, and for the space of over three thousand words his past and present misery unfold. Here at last, the reader thinks, is the hero; and the story is about his poverty, his filial loyalty, and the solitude of his dull existence. But no! The Man of the Vow at last shoots into view, and the tale the fisherman tells about him makes us

forget all else. When this terrible seashore drama has unrolled, the narrative leaps back across the years to the artist and Pauline; and the closing movement portrays the effect of the drama upon them.

Here, to be sure, is a definite arrangement of episodes. But the order itself is quite distinct from the matter ordered. The three acts, as it were, might contain exactly the same incidents and yet relate them in other sequences. Thus, the story might open with the artist and Pauline meeting the fisherman. During the mock barter over his lobster and crab, all the exuberance of the summer visitors' sheer physical joy and all their summer fancies might be brought out, though doubtless not so successfully as in the arrangement which Balzac has chosen. Also, the discovery of Cambremer on his granite boulder might occur in the midst of the artist's first encounter with the poor fisherman; and the fisherman might tell his own history while telling that of the Man with the Vow. (The story would gain much by bringing Cambremer into it sooner.)

No such manipulation affects the plot action. At most, it only obscures or clarifies it. To alter the plot's dramatic quality, you must delete episodes or insert others. This is remarkably easy in *A Seashore Drama*; inasmuch as neither of the first two movements contain integral parts of the central plot. Strictly speaking, both of them contribute only to the atmosphere and the philosophical interpretation. They are pure intensifiers. To state this in the language of the definitions above laid down: they are indirect action, inasmuch as neither the artist nor Pauline nor the fisherman do anything which makes Cambremer drown his profligate son.

a. *Two indirections.* Two varieties of indirect action are conspicuous; first, that which introduces secondary complications (sub-plots) in order to reach the climax; and,



secondly, that which proceeds by developing a character in a manner that conceals the line of action from the reader for a while. Gouverneur Morris' story, *Sapphira*, contains indirect action in the form of a sub-plot, which is peculiarly unsuccessful inasmuch as the minor action almost overwhelms the major. The title indicates that the benevolent liar, Miss Tennant, is the dominant character and consequently that the events centering about and springing from her fibs constitute the plot. But the adventures of David Larkin, particularly his love affair with Another Lady, do much more than bring out Miss Tennant's embarrassments; they make one forget these altogether. *A Circle in the Water* is doubly indirect action. It introduces a secondary complication (which, in this case, can scarcely be called a sub-plot) and it also proceeds by developing the leading character, Tedham, while suppressing the plot action in the earlier movement. Mr. and Mrs. March extraneously make difficult the convict's home-coming and his meeting his daughter. Tedham's reestablishment in his daughter's affections and in society could, so far as the dramatic necessities of the affair are concerned, have been accomplished without most of the elaborate debates and interpositions of the Marches. While these do figure in the action, they serve chiefly to accentuate the public hostility toward ex-convicts and the deeper charity of the Marches, which feebly struggles to masquerade under the guise of sternness. The two indirections shoot through the entire narrative; and their joint effect is especially powerful in the first movement, which runs on through fifteen hundred words without betraying anything about the leading characters and the complication.

b. *The use of direct and of indirect action.* The illustrations we have just considered suggest perhaps that only

direct action is altogether praiseworthy. But this is not true, though it is much more nearly so in the out-and-out character story than elsewhere. Which method is better depends upon the particular effect sought; and the fundamental principle which decides its fitness is the principle of integration. Thus, if we were writing a thematic story, we should not ask ourselves which events in our material are the most exciting, or which rush on to the climax most swiftly. Rather should we seek those which more uniformly and most vividly illuminate the theme. And if, again, we were composing an adventure story whose supreme thrill sprang from pure surprise, we should not choose a plot structure with an eye to its character drawing or its moral or anything else save that startling dénouement.

We may sum up these observations in several practical rules:

Like every other factor, episodes may be intensifiers of whatever single effect the writer aims at. Now, of course, all those which are integral parts of the plot must be reported and suitably developed, lest the action be vague. So the technical problem reduces to two questions: How far may the plot events be elaborated beyond the degree at which they make clear the plot action? And to what extent may one introduce and develop incidents which do not belong to the plot action? The answer is simple enough in form, but hard to apply.

*Only such events may be introduced as heighten the single effect; and they may be developed only up to the point at which they begin to obscure the plot action either by interrupting it or else by diverting interest from it to themselves.*

Let us suppose that you have a plot whose most interesting feature is not the complication nor the atmosphere but, say, the hero's lack of humor. This defect you wish

to bring out most vividly, making it yield the story's single effect. In looking over the essential incidents of the bald plot, you find that, while they reveal the trait, they do not make the most of it. They give the fact but not the thrill of it. What then shall you do? Well, first of all, see whether some of the essential plot incidents cannot be elaborated so as to produce the thrill. If they can, you are fortunate. If they cannot, invent a few episodes which perfectly characterize your hero's mirthlessness and add them to the narrative at the point where they are clear, relevant, and harmless to the continuity of the action.

X— Where is this point? Occasionally you will find it at a lull in the main action where the latter shifts its trend. But, *nine times out of ten, it is at the story's opening.* Not by chance nor by any dead technical formality does it happen thus, but rather because an event so placed does not break in upon the plot action at all and, furthermore, because it fixes the character in advance, thereby relieving the reader of the task of discovering him. As the majority of stories require some measure of secondary intensifying episodes, the opening assumes a tremendous technical importance, of which we shall soon hear more. And those editors who read only the first page or two of a story manuscript seldom err in rejecting a contribution that does not impress them favorably in that brief space.

The length of intensifying plot events that are placed at the opening is pretty easily controlled, but that of interpolated material is not. The reason for this is that every episode which enters into the texture of a plot must, for the drama's sake, hang together smoothly with its antecedents and its consequents, and a certain unpredictable amount of detail is involved in making the two transitions. Unfortunately, the ease and brevity of these depend so much upon the particular events that

no useful rule, nor even suggestion, can be given about them. The writer must fall back upon the general principle.

c. *The two typical errors in plot action.* An episode may violate either the first or the second clause of the general principle and thus give rise to two kinds of faulty action, which we may name:

- i. *Irrelevancy* and
- ii. *Over-intensification.*

i. *Irrelevancy.* Many writers admit matter to their pages 'because it is really connected with the story' or 'because, being connected with it in fact, it will lend a desirable air of reality to the tale'. These, alas, are fundamentally wrong reasons, and they have ruined whole libraries of would-be literature. The genuineness of such a connection is not the slightest argument in favor of introducing the matter. It would be, if you were a scientist investigating a real person and his affairs. But, as an artist striving to exhibit some single effect of a dramatic incident, you must suppress everything that does not make for this end. If you do not, you will produce things like a recent story entitled *The Crime in Jedidiah Peeble's House*,<sup>1</sup> which is (unintentionally) a most solemn warning against the sin of realistic irrelevancy.

Its theme seems to be something like this: 'A criminal is relentlessly pursued by public vengeance and cannot hope to escape it'. The single effect proper to this is, of course, the stern joy of a more than personal justice, mingled perhaps with awe before the spectacle of Fate and the Furies working invisibly through the common people. The main plot action is admirably simple: a fleeing murderer, resting behind a hedge far from the scene of his crime, overhears some people talking about

<sup>1</sup> *Harper's*, March, 1912.

him and his past and his pursuers and his inevitable capture; as they stroll off, the sunset pours its blood-red light over him, and the sky holds up before his terror-stricken eyes a great cloud shaped like the head of the venerable old man whom he has slain. There you have an incident which Hawthorne would have delighted in and exalted to a magnificent, sombre allegory. But, in the author's hands, it has been ruined by the chatter of the wayfarers. Their private affairs, so far as I perceive, have no inner connection with the theme nor with the action; nevertheless they have been spun out and out and still out until the reader is forced to believe that, in some subterranean way, they are of the plot. More than a thousand words are wasted in talk about the women's dresses, their opinions about husbands, the old gentleman's seed store, his pet rabbits, and the love affair of his impecunious grandson. And all the while, behind the hedge, sits the murderer drinking in this dilute, irrelevant conversation. Poor fellow! If he is bored half as much as the reader is, the punishment exceeds his crime.

ii. *Over-intensification.* This fault, unlike the first, is one to which very good writers are susceptible. Indeed, it is the supreme literary virtue running wild. He who clearly perceives his theme, its best single effect, and the plot action is most likely to be carried away by them and to overdraw some significant feature. Maupassant becomes, at times, a victim of literary speed mania and strikes a pace that no narrative drama can hold. Poe often lays on horrors too thickly. Meredith is thrust out of the story-world by the avalanche of his subtle refinements. And so on, even unto the latest of the great, O. Henry, who cannot always control his passion for topsy-turvy surprises.

A fairly clear case of over-intensification occurs in Richard Harding Davis' entertaining psychological story,

*A Question of Latitude*.<sup>1</sup> Its theme is put into the mouth of the English Coaster, who, speaking of the Congo country, says: 'It doesn't matter a damn what a man *brings* here, what his training *was*, what he *is*. The thing is too strong for him. . . . He loses shame, loses reason; becomes cruel, weak, degenerate'. This the plot action illustrates. An eminently moral and well bred Bostonian newspaper man goes to reform the jungle, and the jungle deforms him—but not so seriously that we cannot laugh cynically at his plight, and marvel at the author's mercilessly accurate delineation of human nature in the raw. Now, in order to show the brute force of the tropical wildernesses in full swing, Davis does exactly the right things; first, he makes Everett, the reformer, the incarnation of culture and the proprieties; and, secondly, by anecdote, debate, and pure description, he portrays the Congo country in all its vileness. Every word of all this is pertinent and interesting. The trouble is that it is too interesting and too long. It outshines the story of Everett's infatuation, which is the climax and by all odds the most entertaining part of the plot. The first five hundred words present us with as minute a portrait of the hero as is possible in brief fiction. (O. Henry would have given as accurate a one in seventy-five words.) Then follow about twelve hundred words of conversation on shipboard about the unamiable habits of West Coast savages and the corruption which the African sun works under the European's skull. The next eight hundred words report Everett's harrowing first experiences; and here the plot action gets under way, somewhere around Word No. 2,400, which is at least a thousand words too late.

d. *The formalist fallacy*. The assertion has often been made that 'the short story is Maupassant'; which is a

<sup>1</sup> In the collection entitled *Once Upon a Time* (Scribner's, 1910).

eulogistic way of saying that the pure direct plot action alone is the perfect pattern. This view, however, can be maintained only by assuming that the one legitimate single effect is that of dramatic velocity. Such a presupposition runs counter to the taste of most artists and readers and is, for this reason alone, indefensible inasmuch as literary ideals are essentially a matter of taste. Few of us are so narrow that we find enjoyment only in such swift catastrophes as *The Piece of String*, *The Necklace* and *Little Soldier*. Life is full of gentler griefs and lazier merriment and more languorous romance which claim our tears and laughter no less strongly and which cannot be told adequately with Maupassant's lightning artistry. The pure dramatic story of the French type gives us the dizzying effect of terrific speed. Its scenes and catastrophes flit past as the landscape past a racing automobile. Probably no other sensation is quite so intense, unless it is that of tumbling from an aeroplane. But there are many other *kinds* of intensity, and every well-balanced reader likes to change the flavor of his fiction occasionally. These other intensities are not all attained by swift, direct action. The quality accentuated in the story's single effect may be any one of a large number which reveal themselves in slower stirrings. They are especially prominent in three classes of stories:

- X i. The *thematic* story commonly requires indirect action; because the development of the theme tends to follow the argumentative order of its proof, and the steps of the latter are seldom connected dramatically.
- ii. The *psychological* character story of the analytical type often calls for indirect action, especially when the forces at work in the character are either highly complicated or are interesting because of their surprising solution. In the former case the pattern of action resembles that of the story with sub-plots, the minor

movements being those of the various interplaying instincts, prejudices, and appetites.

iii. The *complication* story employs indirect action in proportion to its intricacy and to the importance of the solution. The pure surprise, such as the detective and the mystery tale, usually is indirect.

In all other cases, however, direct action is better, particularly in the ordinary character story. Such a story depicts conduct in a crisis, and this is never clearer and stronger than when told in its own simple terms, undecorated by attendant circumstances and not refracted through some other character's experience. To interpolate events or commentaries between the items of the pure plot may indeed *interpret* the latter gloriously, but it blurs the picture more or less, coloring the action with preachment.

2. *Necessity*. One of the most hotly debated questions in the older theories of the drama had to do with the nature and bounds of dramatic necessity. To what extent may the playwright allow accidents to happen on his stage? The weight of authority has always been against his allowing it at all. And this opinion has come over, quite naturally, into the theory of dramatic fiction, and today prevails there. As Brander Matthews neatly puts it, "fiction dealt first with the Impossible, then with the Improbable, next with the Probable, and now at last with the Inevitable". And in *The Story-Teller's Art* Charity Dye lays down the orthodox rule, which we must quote for the second time: "In a well-appointed story, not only must everything that happens seem to grow naturally out of the situation, but it must seem to be the only thing that could happen under the circumstances."

However sound this may be in the field of drama, it is little short of preposterous as a commandment to the



fiction writer. It could have been advanced only by persons whose interest in a certain type of literature hid everything else from their understanding. As a criterion of artistic merit it fails miserably, and as a guide in writing it is a sheer impossibility. Not one in a hundred good short stories produces so much as the fleeting impression of inevitability; and I do not believe that more than one author in a hundred strives for that effect. Those who do so, moreover, fall far short of it. Howells, for instance, aspires toward a psychological fatalism in which, as we have heard him say, the events of a story are the mere effects of the particular character whom the writer is exhibiting. As effects, they must of course appear as the necessary consequences of their causes. But how often do they in Howells' stories? Or, again, how often in James' and Mrs. Wharton's? I must confess that I have not experienced so much as the illusion of inevitability there, except in *The Liar* and in that marvelous novelette, *Ethan Frome*.

This is not proof that the ideal of dramatic necessity is wrong. It is only an *argumentum ad hominem*. But practically it is as good as a demonstration; for where such masters of analysis as Howells, James, and Wharton fail we wrongly urge others to rush in. Impersonal evidence of the same import is not lacking, though; and it is most accessible in the ideals of short story.

So long as we are trying to fix upon nothing more than the marks of a good short story, we have no right to look beyond the virtues of dramatic narrative with a single effect. We ought not select a theme or a type of material, or a literary style within such narrative and find therein the 'essence' of the *genre*. The 'essence' is not there, any more than all human beauty is resident in the smile of a lovely face that strikes our fancy. To think that it is, is to perpetrate what the logicians term the fallacy

of accident. It is to confuse form and matter and to exalt the latter to the level of the first. Or it is to mistake an intensity for the quality which is intense.

It may well be that drama attains its supremely enthralling moment when it reveals a human soul triumphantly asserting itself over circumstances which threaten to stifle its virtues and pervert its noblest instincts. But, even so, it does not follow that whatever falls short of this high pitch is not genuine drama. One might as well argue that only the most vivid blue is true blue, and only the loudest note true music. The combination of persons and events which makes dramatic action intense does not make it dramatic. To attain the intensity, the matter must first have acquired the specific quality.

Let us now apply these dry, abstract propositions to the integrative intensifying of the short story. Dramatic necessity is only one of many devices for perfecting the single effect. It is not an ideal of the short story, as such; its usefulness is limited to a relatively small class of character plots, namely those which depict nothing but the operations of sharply defined mental types. Its employment elsewhere probably does more harm than good.

## EXERCISES

The anecdote below is highly ambiguous. Give it as many reasonable interpretations as you can. Then amplify it so variously as to develop in turn (1) a broadly comic complication; (2) a pathetic character story; and (3) a moral tragedy.

Charged with intoxication, a man dressed in a Santa Claus costume caused a stir today in the Adams Street Police Court.

"What is this?" said the Magistrate, as he gazed on the figure before him. "Santa Claus in a police court? I thought he was too busy with getting things ready for Christmas to spend his valuable time in this place?"

Santa Claus appeared bewildered and muttered something that sounded like too much Christmas, but was unable to say any more.

Policeman Joseph Kane told the Magistrate that he had found the man, Louis Kane, at Fulton and Willoughby streets flourishing a bell and requesting the charity of passersby for Christmas. He had a cauldron, into which contributions were dropped.

The policeman said he approached Kane and cautioned him not to be so enthusiastic about the boiling pot.

"But," said Santa, "I am a member of the Volunteers of America and must earn my salary."

"You're drunk," said the policeman.

"Well, I did go into a saloon," the policeman quoted him as saying, "to get some string to tie my whiskers on, as they were falling off, and I must admit I did take about 'two fingers.'"

The man and the pot were taken to the Adams street police station, where "Santa" spent the night, and was discharged today by the Magistrate with a reprimand.

As Kane left the court he was heard to mutter, "Never again!"

2. a. Construct a humorous complication plot out of the following, using the judge as the butt.

b. Make a thematic tragedy plot of it, building around 'red tape' or else the cruel and empty dignity of the law.

C. J. McGuire, a letter carrier, entered the Yorkville Court yesterday with a special delivery letter. He refused to remove his hat from his head when ordered to do so by Court Attendant Rasmussin. He said:

"I am only obeying orders. I am not allowed to take off any part of my uniform while on duty."

Magistrate Breen wanted to know whether the postman couldn't strain a point in favor of courtesy, but McGuire, who seemed to be a stickler for departmental rules, said this was impossible.

"I am only obeying orders. I am not allowed to take off any part of my uniform while on duty", he said, mechanically.

Having found out that the man to whom he had to deliver the letter was stationed in the Men's Night Court, McGuire started to walk out.

"Be sure you keep your hat on when you go into the Night Court", Magistrate Breen called out. Whereupon McGuire answered in a monotone:

"I am only obeying orders. I am not allowed to take off any part of my uniform while on duty."

3. In each of the following stories discover (a) the items of the direct action; (b) those of indirect action (if any); (c) irrelevant episodes, and (d) over-intensified episodes. Explain each case of (c) and (d).

Balzac, H.—*La Grande Bretèche*.

Poe—*The Gold Bug*.

Kipling—*The Man Who Would Be King*

Coppée—*A Voluntary Death*.

O. Henry—*Lost on Dress Parade* (in *The Four Million*).

London, J.—*A Day's Lodging* (in *Love of Life*).

Benefield, B.—*Old Johnnie* (Scribner's, Dec., 1911)

Byron, T. P.—*Loaded Dice* (*Everybody's*, Jan., 1912).

Osbourne, Lloyd—*Detty the Detrimental* (*Everybody's*, Aug., 1910).

4. While reading each of the following stories, note (a) the point in the narrative where you think you foresee the outcome; (b) the point where you revise this guess, and (c) the accuracy of the guess.

James, H.—*Owen Wingrave*.

Deland, Margaret—*The Child's Mother* (in *Old Chester Tales*).

Kipling, R.—*His Wedded Wife* (in *Plain Tales from the Hills*).

London, J.—*The Unexpected* (in *Love of Life*).

Henry, O.—*A Blackjack Bargainer* (in *Whirligigs*).

By what handling of the action is suspense maintained in each story? Which handling succeeds best?

## SUB-CHAPTER C.—THE ORDER OF EVENTS.

This problem is a stumbling block. Not one beginner in twenty solves it, nor does more than one magazine story in five. Why is this? Chiefly because, in arranging events, the writer must look away from his plot for a while and put himself in the reader's place. He may construct his story, insofar as the choice and qualification of its material are concerned, with an eye to nothing save the material itself. For this labor he is sufficiently equipped if he understands his people, times, and places, and recognizes a dramatic complication when he sees or imagines one. But the instant he begins the narrative, he is confronted with a radically different task; he must now communicate with his public, and in such fashion that the latter gets not only the facts but their dramatic effect. This effect is produced by a delicate and exceedingly difficult mingling of revelations and concealments; for, as with humor and music, its peculiar quality depends upon what the audience receives from moment to moment. In the language of rhetoric, it is a matter of order and suspense.

Now, the art of suspense is as different from pure plotting as speech is different from thought. This must be emphasized today as never before, inasmuch as the contrary has been stoutly alleged by not a few authorities. Certain philosophers and literary folk tell us that a story is bound to be no better and no worse than the idea which the author has to express; and hence that, once you clear up your plot and know just what effect you wish it to produce, it will narrate itself.<sup>1</sup> This theory shoots

<sup>1</sup> This theory of the self-expression of ideas originates with the brilliant Italian philosopher and critic, Benedetto Croce. He gives it a form, though, which is not open to the above criticism. The erroneous twist in it appears in the thinking of those, his followers, who apply the doctrine to literature and its teaching.

very close to the truth, and it is not easily refuted in debate; but a little editorial experience quickly discloses its one small yet fatal exaggeration. Everybody who has read MSS. knows that the so-called 'story-sense' and the knack of story-telling are two distinct gifts, almost as independent as the eyes are independent of the ears. Some writers conjure up delightful plots but cannot narrate them effectively, although they have all the details well in hand and write a flowing narrative style. Others, on the contrary, devise weak plots and seem to have little feeling for character and complication; but give them a plot, and they dash off a capital story. There is a well known story writer of to-day whose greatest successes have been built upon plots given to him by obliging editors and whose desperate efforts at originality usually gain him admittance only to third-rate magazines. And three of the most ingenious plot-makers and smoothest writers among my own students have always had difficulty in 'getting it over the footlights', while others much less gifted in fantasy and in command of words have readily produced salable stories.

1. *What order accomplishes.* At least four things are accomplished by the arrangement of episodes:

- i. Transitions are smoothed.
- ii. Characters and situations are clarified.
- iii. The *natural* climactic sequence of the plot events is made evident and sometimes intensified.
- iv. The single effect of the story is sharpened ('the theme is rounded off').

2. *First general law of order.* Throughout his work, the student should keep in mind the principle of simplicity, which, with reference to our present topic, may be thus stated:

*Alter the historical order no more than is necessary.*

And the corollary is: First, discover the historical order and test its narrative values. The beginner, indeed, will generally do well to adhere to it in the first complete draft of each story. He should not trust his judgment in imagining the effect of the sequence.

3. *The special problems of order.* With respect to the material of the story, there arise three special problems of order:

- a. The opening event.
- b. The closing event.
- c. The distribution of events throughout the plot action.

In solving each of these problems, all four of the above named improvements are accomplished, in varying degrees.

a. *The opening event.* The opening event has two functions; it must awaken the reader's interest in the story and it must also carry him quickly into the latter. Either function alone is easily discharged, but to handle both at once demands considerable skill and frequently much experimenting. Many a story which finishes strong begins with dull episodes. Witness that delicious satire of Mrs. Wharton's, *Xingu*,<sup>1</sup> which starts off thus:

Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone. To this end she had founded the Lunch Club, an association composed of herself and several other indomitable huntresses of erudition. The Lunch Club, after three or four winters of lunching and debate, had acquired such local distinction that the entertainment of distinguished strangers became one of its accepted functions; in recognition of which it duly extended to the celebrated 'Osric Dane', on the day of her arrival in Hillbridge, an invitation to be present at the next meeting.

<sup>1</sup>*Scribner's*, Dec., 1911.



A Lunch Club hardly piques the jaded reader's curiosity. But for the stinging characterization of Mrs. Ballinger, he might yawn and pass on to the next article. That clever hit, though, at the get-wise-quick lady stirs him; and he will be dull indeed if he does not wonder what is going to happen to her. Mrs. Wharton's device is perfect, as usual, and we may profitably scrutinize it.

In these hundred words Mrs. Wharton has (1) precisely anticipated the single effect of her story (mildly satirical merriment); (2) outlined the setting; (3) designated and slightly described two of the leading characters, and (4) reported one of the events of the complication. The only thing that has not been broached is the outcome of the comedy; and to omit this is no fault. For the opening does not have to tell the story, but should only coax the reader into it pleasantly; and this can be accomplished in most cases by the factors above named. Furthermore, there is always the danger that, in forecasting the finish, you may betray the action and rob it of all tension and surprise, as Kipling all but does in *At the Pit's Mouth*, when he begins thus:

Once upon a time, there was a Man and his Wife, and a Tertium Quid.

All three were unwise, but the Wife was the unwisest. The man should have looked after his Wife, who should have avoided the Tertium Quid, who, again, should have married a wife of his own, after clean and open flirtation, to which nobody can possibly object, round Jakko or Observatory Hill. . . .

The eternal 'triangle' and its eternal tragedy are too palpable; and, though the outcome is not quite stated, you have only three guesses about it, and each is too, too easy.

Now, bearing in mind the two functions of the opening and the ideals of our *genre* we may distinguish ten ways

of getting a start. I list them in the order of their *general* excellence.<sup>1</sup> (The fifth alone is, as we shall see, often better than its rank.) A story may open with:

- |                  |   |   |
|------------------|---|---|
| Direct action:   | { | 1. Which reveals in some measure the setting, the characters, and the theme or the single effect.<br>2. Which reveals character only.<br>3. Which reveals the setting only.<br>4. Which reveals only the theme or the single effect.<br>5. A philosophical overture. (Anticipatory generalizations without action.) |
| Indirect action: | { | 6. Which reveals setting, characters, and the theme or single effect.<br>7. Which reveals character only.<br>8. Which reveals the setting only.<br>9. Which reveals only the theme or single effect.<br>10. Pure description. (No action and no anticipatory generalizations.)                                      |

For simplicity, I omit from this list six types, namely all those which reveal some *two* of the three story factors, such as character and setting, or setting and theme. There are three two-phase openings with direct action,

<sup>1</sup> The student must be warned against supposing that he falls short of perfection whenever he is unable to begin a story in the better of these manners. It may be that his plot and his single effect necessitate indirect action or the concealment of character up to some point in the midst of the story. Not every story can have the best beginning, any more than it can have the strongest climax. Both start and finish depend more or less upon the episodes that start and finish. Usually at least four or five openings are possible; and the author must discover and choose the best of these.

and three with indirect. Naturally each is better than any one-phase opening of its own type of action. And the student will readily grasp the nature and merits of each, as soon as he has mastered the ten fundamental types.

*Illustrations.*

1. The opening of *Xingu*, already quoted and analyzed.
2. *Love of Life*, by London:

They limped painfully down the bank, and once the foremost of the two men staggered among the rough-strewn rocks. They were tired and weak, and their faces had the drawn expression of patience which comes of hardship long endured. They were heavily burdened with blanket packs which were strapped to their shoulders. Head-straps, passing across the forehead, helped support these packs. Each man carried a rifle. They walked in a stooped posture, the shoulders well forward, the head still farther forward, and the eyes bent upon the ground.

"I wish we had just about two of them cartridges that's layin' in that cache of ours," said the second man.

His voice was utterly and drearily expressionless. He spoke without enthusiasm; and the first man, limping into the milky stream that foamed over the rocks, vouchsafed no reply.

Where are the men? What is their predicament? What is going to befall them? And what is the theme? You cannot know until much farther along in the tale. But the picture of the men excites your interest and promises to lead swiftly into the adventure. In the very next instant the accident happens which makes the story.

3. *The Pursuit of the Piano*, by Howells:

Hamilton Gaite sat breakfasting by the window of a restaurant looking out on Park Square, in Boston, at a table which he had chosen after rejecting one on the Boylston Street side of the place because it was too

noisy, and another in the little open space, among evergreens in tubs, between the front and rear, because it was too chilly. The wind was east, but at his Park Street window it tempered the summer morning air without being a draught; and he poured out his coffee with a content in his circumstance and provision which he was apt to feel when he had taken all possible pains, even though the result was not perfect. . . . (The balance of the paragraph describes Gaites' food.)

It is from this comfortable vantage that the hero first spies Phyllis' piano on its devious way to Lower Merritt. Hence his breakfasting there is an integral part of the plot action. But it carries the reader a very short distance into the story. Is Gaites a fugitive murderer or a hardware drummer or a Harvard professor of astrology? Is the story going to be about the restaurant or his cantaloupe or Park Square or himself? And will it deepen into tragedy or froth up into farce? Thus far, there's not a clue to any of these mysteries. The opening is conspicuously weaker than the preceding types.

#### 4. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, by Poe.

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I do not know how it was—but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant, eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks

of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the afterdream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. . . .

This, it must be confessed, is not an absolutely pure specimen of a direct-action opening which reveals only the theme or the single effect. It tells us a very little, yet a little too much about the setting of the story. Nevertheless, it will serve better than most of its type, inasmuch as it develops so marvelously the emotional tone of the story. With the very first phrase the gloom begins to spread over the pages, and not a sentence thereafter halts it. The power of it overwhelms all else and makes us forget the trifle we thus far know about the narrator and Usher.

There are very few perfect openings of this fourth type, and the reason is evident: it is seldom that an event in the direct plot action can be told without revealing something about the people and places participant in it. For it is these who make the event.

5. *A Municipal Report*, by O. Henry.

East is East, and West is San Francisco, according to Californians. Californians are a race of people; they are not merely inhabitants of a State. They are the Southerners of the West. Now, Chicagoans are no less loyal to their city; but when you ask them why, they stammer and speak of lake fish and the new Odd Fellows Building. But Californians go into detail.

Of course, they have in the climate an argument that is good for half an hour while you are thinking of your coal bills and heavy underwear. But as soon as they come to mistake your silence for conviction, madness comes upon them, and they picture the city of the Golden Gate as the Bagdad of the New World. So far, as a matter of opinion, no refutation is necessary. But,

dear cousins all (from Adam and Eve descended), it is a rash one who will lay his finger on the map and say: "In this town there can be no romance—what could happen here?" Yes, it is a bold and rash deed to challenge in one sentence history, romance, and Rand and McNally.

I call this a philosophical overture because it is neither action nor description nor a simple essay-like introduction, but rather a broad, generalized comment on the cosmic state of affairs which the story is to illustrate or prove. It is philosophical because generalized, and an overture because, to fill out the musical analogy, it gives us in advance the theme we are going to hear developed. It is, of course, an old device of essayists and not unknown to medieval minstrels. Poe used it perfectly several times, notably in *The Man of the Crowd*. But it is Kipling whom we have to thank for bringing it into vogue of late. His *Plain Tales from the Hills* contains a round dozen samples, the clearest of which occur in *Thrown Away* and *On the Strength of a Likeness*. And since them half a hundred authors have learned to turn the same trick neatly.

Truth to tell, it is an easy trick; or, at least, much easier than plunging headlong into the story. For any cracker-barrel orator can draw a hundred glittering generalities out of any item on the first page of the newspaper, as deftly as a magician pulls rabbits from a hat; and every story that is worth telling at all is at least as prolific as newspaper items. Furthermore, the transition from a universal proposition to the plot action follows three simple patterns, which we may name: (1) the exception, (2) the proof, and (3) the musing that finds an answer. The first appears in Kipling's *A Germ-Destroyer*.

As a general rule, it is inexpedient to meddle with questions of State in a land where men are paid to work them out for you. *This tale is a justifiable exception.*

Or you may follow this second model, from *Miss Youghal's Sais* by the same author:

Some people say that there is no romance in India. Those people are wrong. Our lives hold quite as much romance as is good for us. Sometimes more.

Or, thirdly, you may pursue subtler and lengthier musings; frivolous wisdom such as O. Henry passes out in *The Venturers*, *Psyche* and *the Psky-scraper*, and *The Green Door*; or serious reflections such as Howells traces in *A Circle in the Water*. Here the narrator seems to be wondering or half-asserting some thought when suddenly the thought *exemplifies* itself in an incident.

The power of the philosophical overture cannot be denied. Being a statement of fact, or at least having the air of such, it draws the reader into a serious mood; and this mood tends to perpetuate itself throughout the reading of the whole narrative. Only a very well managed dramatic opening attains this highly desirable result. Few indeed are the stories which, from the outset, deceive us into feeling that they are history; and, of these, nearly all either sound the depths of life, as *They* and *Without Benefit of Clergy* and *Will of the Mill* do, or else are quasi-arguments with the stories proper seemingly tacked on by way of evidence. Now, this latter class is much larger than the former. And when we ask why, we come upon the one noteworthy exception to the ranking of the ten possible openings.

*When the intrinsic dramatic quality of a character and the plot in which the character figures is mediocre, the philosophical overture is usually better than a direct-action opening.*

The reason for this is, in the narrowest sense of the word, technical. I mean, it is not to be found in the 'pure idea' of the story, much less in the nature of the

character depicted. The philosophical overture serves in two ways: first, *to reinforce the single effect* which, in pure dramatic presentation, may be weak; and, secondly, *to attract the reader* as the simple narrative cannot do.<sup>1</sup>

6. *The Descent into the Maelstrom*, by Poe.

We had now reached the summit of the loftiest crag. For some minutes the old man seemed too much exhausted to speak.

"Not long ago," said he at length, "and I could have guided you on this route as well as the youngest of my sons; but, about three years past, there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man—or, at least, such as no man survived to tell of—and the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up, body and soul. You suppose me a very old man—but I am not. It took less than a single day to change those hairs from jet black to white, to weaken my limbs, and unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow. Do you know, I can scarcely look over this little cliff without getting giddy?"

The 'little cliff' upon whose edge he had so carelessly thrown himself down to rest that the weightier portion of his body hung over it, while he was only kept from falling by the tenure of his elbow on its extreme and slippery edge—this 'little cliff' arose, a sheer and unobstructed precipice of black shining rock, some fifteen or sixteen hundred feet from the world of crags beneath us. Nothing would have tempted me to be within half a dozen yards of its brink. . . . (The rest of the opening describes the Maelstrom, as seen from this cliff.)

<sup>1</sup> These two services *ought* to be identical, but are not. Often the philosophical overture touches vividly upon some idea which bobs up in the story more or less incidentally. And, on the other hand, it sometimes reinforces the single effect without interesting the reader. In both cases the story plot is almost certain to be seriously defective. If its single effect cannot appeal to us in essay form, it is too confused or too artificial ever to appeal in any dramatic form.



Here we have the setting, the dominant character, and the single effect consummately drawn in their first outlines. But notice how the action differs from that of *Xingu*. There the events were the first of the plot which ensued; here they have only a remote, accidental connection with the old fisherman's nerve-racking adventure. He leads the visitor to the cliff and, while the latter gazes upon the awful waters below, tells the story.

For the character story and its varieties this opening rarely succeeds. Daudet sometimes bends it to his purposes in a swift and masterly fashion, as, for example, in *The Siege of Berlin*:

We were going up Avenue des Champs-Élysées with Dr. V.—, asking the shell-riddled walls and the side walks torn up by grape-shot for the story of the siege of Paris, when, just before we reached the Rondpoint de l'Etoile, the doctor stopped and, pointing to one of the great corner houses so proudly grouped about the Arc de Triomphe, said to me:

"Do you see those four closed windows up there on that balcony? In the early days of August, that terrible August of last year, so heavily laden with storms and disasters, I was called there to see a case of apoplexy. It was the apartment of Colonel Jouve, a cuirassier of the First Empire, an old enthusiast on the subject of glory and patriotism, who had come to live on the Champs-Élysées, in an apartment with a balcony, at the outbreak of the war. Guess why! In order to witness the triumphant return of our troops! Poor old fellow! The news of Wissembourg reached him just as he was leaving the table. When he read the name of Napoleon at the foot of that bulletin of defeat, he fell like a log."

There is wonderful skill in this seemingly simple opening. Within the space of two short paragraphs it melts, like a dissolving stereopticon view, from the indirect to the direct action. Nevertheless it is the exception that proves our rule; for, upon close analysis, you will find that

the indirect action in it, which ends with 'Guess why!' does not depict the character trait of Jouve that counts in the story. We are casually told before that he is a chauvinist, but not that his chauvinism sets things agoing. The instant the narrating physician has pointed out the apartment and named its former occupant he takes up the main plot action, and so deftly that the reader perceives no change in the narrative quality. But the change is there; so Daudet has not used the sixth opening type straight, he has bent it.

This opening is very useful in the atmosphere story, and in the adventure story. *The Descent into the Maelstrom* is both of these. The interested student may easily figure out for himself its utility there.

7. *A Second-Rate Woman*, by Kipling.

"Dressed! Don't tell me that woman ever dressed in her life. She stood in the middle of the room while her ayah—no, her husband—it must have been a man—threw her clothes at her. She then did her hair with her fingers, and rubbed her bonnet in the flue under the bed. I know she did, as well as if I had assisted at the orgie. Who is she?" said Mrs. Hauksbee.

"Don't!" said Mrs. Mallowe feebly. "You make my head ache. I'm miserable today." (Then follows more about the Dowd, who is the heroine.)

This opening is weak, but not in every respect. It often does succeed in illuminating character, as in the above specimen. But it is long-winded, devious, and hence confusing. If you must depict a person indirectly, you have only two simple and plastic devices: let somebody state his impressions of the person, or else depict the effect the person has upon people or affairs. The former device is hard to keep within bounds; as in our illustration, when you let two women talk about a third, not even a Kipling can throttle them in time to save the

story.<sup>1</sup> The second device, on the other hand, tends to become an independent episode, readable perhaps for its own sake but leading nowhere. Of course, if you want to mislead your reader, you cannot do better than to use it. Hence in the pure surprise story and in humorous narrative (which calls for incongruity and breaks) it may be recommended.

8. *A Voluntary Death*, by Coppée.

I knew the poet Louis Miraz very well, in the old times in the Latin Quarter, where we used to take our meals together at a *crêmerie* on the Rue de Seine, kept by an old Polish woman whom we nicknamed Princess Choculawska, on account of the enormous bowl of *crème* and chocolate which she exposed daily in the show window of her shop. It was possible to dine there for ten sous, with 'two breads', an 'ordinaire' for thirty centimes, and a 'small coffee'.

Some who were very nice spent a sou more for a napkin.

(Then follows a description of the other habitués of the *crêmerie*.)

This is a wasteful opening and much less effective than the preceding one. In the character story the setting is almost invariably the least consequential factor. Why then should it have one of the most important paragraphs reserved for it exclusively? This question becomes doubly pertinent when, as in the present case, neither the action nor the setting which it reveals is closely connected with the chief events. Coppée advances his story in only a trifling degree; he establishes the acquaintance of the narrator with the poet hero, and nothing more. The Polish woman, the chocolate, the hoary ex-dictator, the Buddhist student, and all the rest of the scene count for

<sup>1</sup> Probably Kipling, in the story cited, wanted to show up the malicious garrulity of the Dowd's detractors. If so, the opening is more justifiable, although still overdone.

absolutely nothing in the career of Louis Miraz. Had all the good words wasted on them been spent on the splendid bravery of Miraz, the tale would have become a short story.

9. *A Passion in the Desert*, by Balzac.

"The sight was fearful!" she cried, as we left the menagerie of Monsieur Martin.

She had been watching that daring performer work with his hyenas, to speak in the style of the posters.

"How on earth," she continued, "can he have tamed his animals so as to be sure of enough of their affection to—"

"That fact, which seems to you a problem," I replied, interrupting her, "is however perfectly natural."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, while an incredulous smile flickered on her lip.

"Do you mean to say that you think beasts are entirely devoid of passions?" I asked her. "Let me tell you that we can safely give them credit for all the vices due to our state of civilization."

This type is clumsy and thoroughly antiquated. To find a skilful author dallying with it, you must go back to Balzac and Turgenieff; back to the days when nobody counted words, and men had not yet thought of the short story as an art having its own definite laws. The Russian novelist, in particular, exhibits the most amazing indifference to structure; many of his tales, such as *Andrei Kolossoff* and *The Jew*, exceed the crudity of a modern tyro in their openings. The wretchedest hack-writers know better today than to squander words in letting some imaginary person tell your reader that you are going to tell a story about a certain subject. It is this and no more that Balzac's opening accomplishes.

Weak as it is, though, it often combines successfully with the philosophical overture. That is to say, *if the indirect action takes the form of a discussion which not*

only reveals the theme or single effect but also generalizes broadly and argumentatively about it, the opening may be very lively. Again we turn to Daudet for an exceedingly perfect and ingeniously unobtrusive specimen: the beginning of his pretty fable-story, *The Goat of M. Seguin*.

To M. Pierre Gringoire, Lyrical Poet, at Paris.

You will always be the same, my poor Gringoire!

Think of it! You are offered the place of reporter on a respectable Paris newspaper, and you have the assurance to refuse! Why look at yourself, unhappy youth! Look at that worn-out doublet, those dilapidated breeches, that gaunt face which cries aloud that it is hungry! And this is where your passion for rhyme has brought you! This is the result of your ten years of loyal service among the pages of my lord Apollo! Aren't you ashamed?

Be a reporter, you idiot! Be a reporter! You will earn honest crowns, you will have your special seat at Brébant's; and you will be able to appear every first night with a new feather in your cap.

No? You will not? You propose to remain perfectly free to the end? Well, just listen to the story of Monsieur Seguin's goat. You will see what one gains by attempting to remain free.

Notice carefully in what respect this differs from the opening of *A Passion in the Desert*. In both the action is indirect. In both all that is revealed of the story is the theme. But in Balzac's opening the theme is merely stated in the midst of an extraneous incident, while in Daudet's it is 'played up', argued, and enlivened prettily, with irrelevant but illustrative action. Between the two manners, the static and the dynamic, lies the whole gulf that separates bungling from art.

This combination opening is best suited to stories having well-marked themes or strong single effects. But it could be used only when the entanglements of the

plot happen to make a direct action opening awkward or dull.

10. *A Taste of Honey*, by Mary Wilkins Freeman.

The long, low, red-painted cottage was raised above the level of the street, on an embankment separated into two terraces. Steep stone steps led up the terraces. They were covered with green, slimy moss, and little ferns and weeds sprang out of every crack. A wall of flat slate stones led from them to the front door, which was painted green, sagged on its hinges, and had a brass knocker.

The whole yard and the double banks were covered with a tall, waving crop of red-top and herds-grass and red and white clover. It was in the height of haying time.

A grassy wheel-track led round the side of the house to a barn dashed with streaks of red paint.

Off to the left stretched some waving pasture land, and a garden patch marked by bean-poles and glancing corn blades, with a long row of bee-hives showing in the midst of it.

A rusty open buggy and a lop-eared white horse stood in the drive opposite the side door of the house.

It seems incredible that a writer who could imagine the genuine pathos and tragedy of this story could stumble into it so clumsily. The opening might pass in the loosest impressionistic sketch, which is not supposed to get anywhere—and seldom does. But, in a short story, which *A Taste of Honey* ought to be, all these irrelevant minutiae of the landscape are so many mosquitoes buzzing around the plot. They do not spoil the plot, but they bother the reader who wishes to reach it. I trust that no argument is needed to condemn them. The student who does not sense their impropriety will, I fear, never grasp the short story. Incidentally be it said that the ability to unroll such description is no mark of literary power. He is a dull high school graduate who cannot equal it.

## EXERCISES

Analyze the openings of the following stories and tell which type each is. Also criticize the fitness of each.

Hopper, J.—*Memories in Men's Souls* (*American*, Feb., 1911).

Johnson, O.—*One Hundred in the Dark* (*Saturday Ev. Post*, Oct. 21, 1911).

Moore, G.—*The Exile* (in *The Untilled Field*: Lippincott, 1903).

Coppée, F.—*An Accident* (in *Ten Tales*, Harper's, 1890).

James, H.—*Collaboration*.

Williams, J. L.—*The Honeymoon* (in *The Married Life of the Frederic Carrolls*, Scribner's, 1910).

Freeman, Mary Wilkins—*A Humble Romance*.

b. *The closing event.* In comparison with the opening, the closing event is no problem at all. The variety of endings is much less, and one's choice is not supremely important. Furthermore, the material is more plastic and may be experimented upon freely, without involving radical changes in the body of the story.

There are three types of endings:

- i. The direct dénouement.
- ii. The significant aftermath.
- iii. Interpretative comment.

i. *The direct dénouement.* This is the ideal finish of the pure dramatic story. If action and character development have advanced apace; if, in the supreme crisis, all that remains for us to learn is how the hero, being what we know him to be, meets it; then the author who tells us more only offends us. Few are the gems which are cut so true up to the last stroke; hence this finish is rare. It is more often approximated in the dramatic mystery story. We find it in Poe's masterpiece, *Ligeia*:

. . . I stirred not—but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts—a tumult unappeasable. Could it indeed be the *living* Rowena who confronted me? Could it indeed be Rowena *at all*—the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine? Why, *why* should I doubt it? . . . —*had she then grown taller since her malady?* What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; *it was blacker than the raven's wings of the midnight!* And now slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me. "Here then, at least," I shrieked aloud,



"can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA."

It is inconceivable that a better dénouement could be fashioned. The very last word alone lifts the veil. Until it has been read, the reader's imagination is led off in a different path. Unless he has analyzed as he goes, he is quite sure that the Lady Rowena is returning to life. And, fancying this, he may suspect that the story breaks in twain clumsily; the earlier account of Ligeia seeming irrelevant to the resurrection of her successor. But, when that one key word falls under his eye, the entire phantasmagorical welter of bewilderments and horror orders itself into a clear plot whose theme Poe has *thrice* sounded: 'Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will'.

Probably few plots admit of such manipulation. The dramatic form is too intense to suit most material. To be more accurate, most themes do not focus so sharply upon one instant's revelation. Their solutions are complex and require a certain elaboration. *Xingu*, for instance, reaches its dénouement when the Lunch Club consults the encyclopædia and learns that the topic of their learned conversation is not a religion nor a book but a river in South America. But, though the dénouement is here reached, it is not finished in that act. The story demands that every member of the Lunch Club realize minutely how Mrs. Roby has hoaxed it, and that the Club 'do something about it'. Inevitably all this must follow, not precede, the discovery in the encyclopædia. Again, there are other themes which, though they may be wrought into action with the *Ligeia* finish, ought not to end so, inasmuch as the dramatic quality of their complication is too weak to harmonize with this

most intense of all dramatic dénouements. Low-grade magazines and Sunday Supplements reek with mechanically perfect specimens of it. Their detective stories and other tales of mystery keep the reader guessing up to the final paragraph. Nevertheless, they fall flat; and the reason is that their form exceeds their material. The shape and motion of a story is visible in each, but the stuff of life is not therein.

This failure, alas, is all too easy. It is easy to tangle your heroes and villains, and to manufacture mysteries. It is as easy as inventing a cipher code or concealing a fact, and often it is nothing more. Now, the difficulty of solving a puzzle or discovering a way out of a predicament is usually out of all proportion to the importance of the puzzle or predicament. The brain power that has been spent on pigs-in-clover, charades, and jig-saw pictures might have abolished war; and the manual labor that has gone into them would have dug the Panama Canal. In real life, where it is stylish to be absurd, this disproportion of effort to result is allowed; but in art, which is little more than the passion for fitness expressing itself, it is the unpardonable sin. The mountain that brings forth a mouse is brother to the author who works up a tense, breathless perplexity and then clears it up with an episode which shows the complication to be trifling. In the world of beauty, whither he would lead us, he may affect us seriously only with serious affairs, and deeply only with deep, and romantically only with romantic. The humorist alone is privileged to toy with the incongruous.

I cannot drop this topic without urging the student to study carefully the maturer stories of O. Henry, who surpasses all writers past and present in his mastery of the direct dénouement. What a host of his complications do not solve themselves until the last fifty words! There

is *The Furnished Room*, with its startling, pathetic complication clearing in Mrs. Purdy's last remark: "She'd a-been called handsome, as you say, but for that mole she had a-growin' by her left eyebrow". There is *Tobin's Palm*, with its preposterously funny reunion of the lovers in the last ten seconds. And, finest of all, though by no means the last in the list, is *The Municipal Report*, with its yellow horn overcoat button the size of a fifty-cent piece clearing up a dark mystery and proving the romance of dull places. There is no exceeding the perfection of these dénouements. One must admire them with a touch of awe, even though one dislikes the slap-dash, slangy, kinetoscopic hurry of the stories. Nowhere outside of Poe and Maupassant are they equalled.

X ii. *The significant aftermath*. This is the commonest ending and usually the most appropriate. It consists of some little event which shows precisely how the characters are taking the dénouement. Sometimes it intensifies the latter, but more often only clears away the last uncertainty about it. The length depends entirely upon the particular dénouement, and the importance of showing the characters' <sup>South</sup>reaction to it. X In *Xingu* the aftermath is quite elaborate, and necessarily so. It begins after Mrs. Ballinger says: "And they're shrieking over us at this moment",—and continues to the very end.<sup>1</sup> In Coppée's *The Substitute* it is swift and short. The dé-

<sup>1</sup> The long conversation in which the ladies fit together Mrs. Roby's remarks and bring them into harmony with the encyclopædia's statements about Xingu is not aftermath, but dénouement. Some readers who are over-fond of the Maupassant model feel that Mrs. Roby's previous connection with South America should have been brought out in the opening of the story, so that this long explanation might be dispensed with, at the very point where things should rush along at top speed. But analysis proves this opinion wrong. The single effect depends absolutely upon keeping the nature of Xingu hidden until the dénouement.

nouement is over when Jean François takes Savinien's crime upon himself and holds out his hands for the handcuffs, laughing at the police. After that:

To day he is at Cayenne, condemned for life as an incorrigible.

Observe how much this little sentence accomplishes. It fixes the outcome, past all misunderstanding. Omit it, and the reader might wonder whether Jean François was as great a hero as he led Savinien to think. The galleys are terrible places; but did the ex-convict end up there? Might he not have concealed his identity, been sentenced as a first offender, and let off with a six months' sentence? Or might he not have escaped again from the thongs of justice? Perhaps the reader might not frame these doubts consciously; he might only be less profoundly impressed by the shortened version. But this weaker effect would be due to the indecisiveness of the dénouement.

iii. *Interpretative Comment.* This is the counterpart of the philosophical overture. Like it, it contains no action; unlike it, it need not consist of generalizations. It may be no more than a summary and a sentiment, as in London's *The Heathen*:

And so passed Otoo, who saved me and made me a man, and who 'saved me in the end. We met in the maw of a hurricane and parted in the maw of a shark, with seventeen intervening years of comradeship the like of which I dare to assert have never befallen two men, the one brown and the other white. If Jehovah be from his high place watching every sparrow fall, not least in His Kingdom shall be Otoo, the one heathen of Bora Bora. And if there be no place for him in that Kingdom, then will I have none of it.

Or it may return to the opening event, as in Harris Merton Lyon's horribly true sketch of American village

life, entitled \$448.00. Somewhat abridged, the opening runs thus:

In fourteen decillion B.C., . . . this stubborn planet upon which we so carelessly shuffle our feet began a series of Experiments toward an End. . . . At first she tried for trees, and got trees. Then snails, clams, jellyfish. Then, brooding over her intent, she made the jellyfish climb up out of the sea. . . . Then she watched yearningly through the morose years the light and the air beat down upon the jellyfish and irritated it. . . . After three hundred million jellyfish had died in the process, she slumbered and considered the process complete. After fourteen decillion, one thousand eight hundred and seventy-six years had passed, she rested. . . . for the End of her Experiments had come. The numberless millions of jellyfishes and the superb march of countless years had produced Leander Percy Johnson.

Then follows the story of Leander's career; a story made twice horrible by the streak of humor in its telling. The dramatic end comes when the army surgeons pull Leander, U. S. V. and fever victim, out of his storm-wrecked Chickamauga tent, dead. Then follow two endings, the first an unnecessary aftermath, and the second the following brief interpretative comment:

And the old earth groaned and began it all over again. For Leander had returned to the jellyfish whence he came. He had gone back to fourteen decillion B.C.

A third excellent variation is a return to the philosophical overture. In this wise Howells admirably turns the close of *A Circle in the Water*. The story opens, you recall, with the narrator's musing over the consequences of good and evil and over the ever-widening circles made by pebbles cast into the pool. And, after Tedham has been restored to his daughter,

comes this ending, which integrates perfectly with the final action:

. . . So far as human vision can perceive, the trouble he made, the evil he did, is really at an end. Love, which alone can arrest the consequences of wrong, had ended it, and in certain luminous moments it seemed to us that we had glimpsed, in our witness of this experience, an infinite compassion encompassing our whole being like a sea, where every trouble of our sins and sorrows must cease at last like a circle in the water.

Were we here cataloguing all types of endings which have been used by good writers, we should have to mention, among others, two forms of the significant aftermath and two of the interpretative comment. The first pair are (a) the effect of the plot action upon a character in the story, and (b) its effect upon the narrator or hearer outside of the story. The second pair are (a) a comment by a character, and (b) one by the narrator outside of the story. (When the narrator happens to be a character in the story, we have case (a) in both instances.) These distinctions need not concern us here; for they have to do with the *point of view* from which each particular story is told. The serious problems raised by the point of view will soon be discussed. It is enough to notice in the present connection that there is one ending which is to be shunned whenever possible, namely the second type of aftermath. This occurs in its most deadly form in Turgenieff's *Andrei Kolosoff*:

"And what became of Varya?" asked some one.

"I don't know," replied the story-teller.

We all rose and went our various ways.

Could anything jerk the reader more violently out of the imaginary world in which Kolosoff lives? And to less purpose? The author might better have sold the space of

these three atrocious lines to a patent medicine quack for advertising purposes.

When, however, such an ending is combined with interpretative comment, it becomes much more endurable, as in Hopper's *Memories in Men's Souls*. At best, though, it is a makeshift, to be avoided whenever possible.

c. *The distribution of events throughout the plot action.*

To the casual scanner of magazines the dramatic patterns of stories seem infinitely numerous. To the hardened professional reader they reduce to a half-dozen, and sometimes even this half-dozen tends to shrink. The popular impression derives from the natural and proper blending of the plot action with the 'trimmings' in the reader's mind. The author forecasts, deceives, comments, suppresses, and bursts into description in a multitude of manners; and, the more skilful he, the more deceivingly all these touches fuse with the broad sweep of the plot. This is as it should be; for the machinery of the story should be concealed no less than are the wing lights and the thunder-drum of the theatre. But it produces the illusion of a boundless variety of narrative types.

~~The fact is~~, very few first-class stories deviate widely from the old, familiar pattern of the drama. There are three movements (corresponding to the three acts of the modern play). In the first three factors appear: (a) the setting, (b) the characters, and (c) the generating circumstances; that is, those which give rise to the ensuing complication. The second movement presents two classes of episodes: (a) the complication, and (b) the reaction of the characters to it. This reaction often bulks large. The third movement gives (a) the crucial situation (climax), and (b) the dénouement (with aftermath, if one is needed). It is this pattern which orders the episodes. *And you should never depart from it unless something in the single effect which you seek or in the specific texture of your plot action compels you.* This is a commandment not because the pattern is as old and venerable as Aristotle, but because it is so obviously



the strongest dramatic sequence that people long ago discovered it and agreed upon it.

This pattern carries with it several implications:

1. *Telescope the events within each movement as much as possible. That is, make each episode develop all the story factors in its movement.*

2. *If the events cannot be telescoped, depict first those which demand the greater amount of pure description, except insofar as the single effect or dramatic sequence forbids this.*

3. *Transitions are best effected by telescoping the last event of one movement with the first event of the next.*

4. *The natural order of events may be altered in only two cases: (a) when the dénouement can be concealed up to the proper instant in no other way, and (b) when the plot action is shaped by some character's learning the episodes in their false order.*

Another quartet of rules might be laid down, but the learner will automatically master them as soon as he has grasped those we have given. And now a word about these.

1. We have repeatedly seen that the single effect at which the short story aims demands the employment of a minimum of material; and this fact alone is enough to warrant the first rule. In strict logic, this rule is not a rule of arrangement, but rather one for escaping the problem of arrangement. You will see this, once you consider an extreme illustration. Suppose you were able to depict adequately in one incident the setting, the generating circumstances, and the characters. Would you have to worry over the next event? Not at all. You would go straight to the complication and character trait of the second movement. And if you could also telescope these perfectly into one episode, again you would have transcended the problem. In anecdotes and ad-

venture stories, which seldom involve much character drawing, it is not surpassingly difficult to do this, inasmuch as a mere name and a phrase will there tell enough about the people. The opening event of Daudet's *The Little Pies* integrates almost perfectly the three factors, character, setting, and complication:

That morning, which was a Sunday, Sureau, the pastry cook on Rue Turenne, called his apprentice and said to him:

"Here are Monsieur Bonnicar's little pies; go take them to him and come back at once. It seems that the Versailles have entered Paris."

In these three short sentences Daudet marshals almost everything which is going to count in the ensuing dramatic movement. There is only one slight omission. The pastry cook should have warned the lad not to dally, because M. Bonnicar was a very particular and fidgety old epicure. This would have introduced accurately, albeit indirectly, the one other important personage. As the opening stands, you have no hint that Bonnicar himself is going to figure in the affair; much less that his gastronomical habits will. Nevertheless, it is a wonderfully skilful piece of integration.

2. This is the most frequently violated rule of order. And the violation is due largely to false teaching. Two doctrines have been advanced by writers on narrative technique: one is that all inevitable description must be bunched as near the opening as possible; the other is that the story must begin with action and scatter its descriptions where they will least clog the movement of the plot. The first doctrine is based upon the assumption that the speed of the narrative should increase steadily to the end, and that hence the slowest material, which is, of course, the more descriptive, must come first. The second doctrine grows out of the hypothesis

that the short story should be pure dramatic narrative throughout, and therefore disencumbered of all exclusively descriptive passages.

Unfortunately, both suppositions are false; uniform acceleration of action is not an ideal at all, and pure dramatic narrative is not an *exclusive* ideal. The short story has two ideals, both playing incessantly upon every manipulation of its material. The correct principle of arrangement reckons equally with both of these ideals, and it consequently bids us to employ descriptive events *at those points where description best intensifies both the single effect and the action; or, if impossibly both, then that one which stands in greater need of intensification.*

Now, from this may be deduced several special practices the most important of which are the following:

a. *The more completely the plot action and the single effect grow out of a single setting, a single character trait, and a single generating circumstance, the more completely should the descriptive events be massed in the opening.*

b. *The more completely the plot action and the single effect grow out of some one factor (such as the setting, or the character trait, or the complication), the more completely should the descriptive events mass around the first development of that factor.*

These two rules hold not only for character stories but for all other types. To perceive this, consider three stories which differ as widely as possible from one another: *A Coward*, *Ligeia*, and O. Henry's skit, *Calloway's Code*. The first is the purest character drama; the second is that rarest of all, the three-phase story; and the third is the lightest sort of complication. I choose these, because the test of a rule is in extreme instances.

In the first everything grows out of the viscount's single trait, a single custom of French society, and a single encounter; hence every line of description is

packed into the first three paragraphs. And why? Because, first of all, this description must precede all the action, in order to make the latter intelligible; and, secondly, because no other description is needed, inasmuch as the single effect is here identical with the dramatic action.

In *Ligeia* Poe aims at integrating setting, character, and complication; and the single effect, which is the emotion aroused by the thought of a human will triumphing over death, even through another's body, is produced equally throughout all three factors. You feel it in the person of Ligeia, and in the death chamber, and in the grewsome complications. Every touch and turn keeps you thinking vaguely that stupendous, mysterious powers are at work in the invisible environment. Now, unlike *A Coward*, *Ligeia* has several generating circumstances and several complications, all of which the reader will easily find for himself. It is therefore an extreme negative instance under rule (b). Its plot and action and single effect do not grow out of one factor, nor are the factors out of which they grow simple; therefore, if our rule is sound, the descriptive events will not mass around one factor or one event, but will be distributed around many. This, of course, is precisely what we find. The story is the despair of the dramatic formalists who preach the Mau-passant pattern. More than 2,000 words at the very outset—nearly as many as in *A Coward*—describe minutely the beauty and learning and character of Ligeia. Between the first movement, which ends with the marriage of Rowena, and the second, which begins with her husband's first outbursts of hatred toward her, there are interpolated over six hundred words sketching the bridal chamber in the gloomy dwelling. Finally, throughout the third movement, the picturing is steady and rich, even up to the dénouement.

*Calloway's Code* tells us how a cub reporter deciphered a mysterious cable dispatch which the newspaper's special correspondent in the Russo-Japanese war smuggled past the press censor. The whole interest centres upon the cipher and the youngster who discovered it. Hence it is that the only description in the entire story is of Vesey, the cub, at the moment when he walks in, peruses the message which has baffled everybody else, and solves it; and of the veteran who padded the report for scare-head purposes. Unquestionably, this second touch is irrelevant; but it is very brief and inoffensive.

In conclusion, the gist of the second rule of order is this: usually some special quality of the single effect or the dramatic action fixes the order of the more important descriptive events and pure descriptions; and when it does not clearly do so, the latter properly come as early in the story as possible.

3. The rule of transitions is so familiar and lucid that discussion is not called for. Perhaps it should be noticed in passing, though, that many plots pass abruptly from movement to movement, by the very nature of their events and their direction. The student must therefore be on his guard against a false ideal. He must not strive to make the action continuous, unless he has assured himself that it is not intrinsically broken. Often the breaks will be so sharp that, in mere honesty to the public, they should be typographically symbolized. I know, some critics consider a line of asterisks in the middle of a tale most uncanonical; but so much the worse for critics and canons. They are trying the impossible, in imposing an external form upon an art which takes its shape only from ideals and ideas. Maupassant's *The Necklace* has four visible breaks, and yet even the formalists concede its flawlessness. A *Coward* has two breaks; *The Horla*, with its diary form, has half a hundred; *The Elixir of Father*

*Gaucher* has six,—and, were a chronicler so minded, he might array a glittering host of splendid works against the error, drawing them from almost every master of fiction.

4. The superiority of the natural order of events ought to be apparent, but to many it is not. Young writers commonly suppose that historical inversion is an unfailing virtue; that it whets the reader's curiosity, puzzles him, and thus heightens the effect of the story. The result of this belief is a flood of stories that aren't stories; that is, much writing about undramatic, intrinsically dull happenings. The momentary illusion of story stuff is produced by twisting things or by standing them on their heads. One might count so-called detective and mystery tales by the score which ape the real kind by just such operations. They attempt it because the real kind almost always inverts events; and the aping authors fancy that, by copying the form, they may seize the substance. This peculiarity of the cheap mystery and detective story we have already dwelt upon.<sup>1</sup>

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a plot that is very weak when narrated in its natural order is not worth pottering over. And, if strong in that order, its strength is seldom increased by inversion. The rare exception is usually of the second kind above mentioned; it is a story of misunderstanding. In such a story, the dominant character sometimes does what he does because he supposes that something happened at a certain time; when, as a matter of fact, it happened before or after that time and under circumstances which give it a meaning unsuspected by the hero. In such a case, the story must be told partly from the hero's point of view, in order that we may sympathetically understand his behavior.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 160 etc.

## SUB-CHAPTER D.—THE POINT OF VIEW

1. *The confusion on this subject.* This is the most neglected of all technical questions, and the most confused. The strangest medley of conflicting and vague opinions on the subject fills the text-books. At one extreme, we hear that 'the best method of narration, the simplest and most natural, is to tell the story in the third person, as if you were a passive observer.'<sup>1</sup> And at the other extreme: 'Any way is good, if it is artistic; but some ways are harder than others.'<sup>2</sup> Now, the former extreme is false in every adjective; the third person is neither the best nor the simplest nor the most natural point of view, as will shortly be proved. And, as for the second extreme, it is an empty phrase. It means nothing to say that any way is good, if artistic; for 'good' means 'artistic' here, so that the assertion comes to this: any artistic way is artistic, and any good way is good. Of course, what the critic is trying to say is that the point of view depends upon the writer's personal taste and skill. But this is demonstrably false, at least in most instances. Truth is, the point of view is inextricably bound up with the specific material and the desired single effect of each particular story, and hence only an analysis of these latter will throw light upon the angle from which the story is to be told.

2. *Two meanings of 'point of view.'* Though the risk of confusion is slight, it is well to distinguish at once two senses in which one may speak of a point of view. People say that Thomas Hardy's point of view is artificial, Hawthorne's ultra-puritanical, and Maupassant's cynically

<sup>1</sup> Barrett, 131.

<sup>2</sup> Esenwein, 109.

pessimistic. And they mean that what Hardy himself sees and depicts is unreal, what Hawthorne observes is a world mercilessly dominated by a cruel monster called Virtue; and what Maupassant notes is that man belongs to the animal kingdom. Now all this, of course, is not what we refer to when we say that *A Coward* is narrated from an objective point of view. It is the angle of narration which we are here thinking of, and not the effect of the things which the author depicts. The difference, as well as the relation, between these points of view is precisely that which we find in painting; and as the latter is much more visible and simple, it may well serve as a leading string into a sharper comprehension of the other.

Corot loved the blues and grays of springtime dawns and rain-washed glades. Only where he found these colors in all their freshness was he wont to stand his easel. Now, in our fancy, let us follow him some soft morning until he comes upon a dip in the land framed with young poplars and cherishing the last wraiths of night mist. The sight halts him, and he drops his kit on the wet grass. In this act he expresses the first point of view. He is doing what Hardy, Hawthorne, and Maupassant do; *he selects from the world those things toward which he is acutely sensitive*. Seeing them as other men do not, he strips them of all those many entangling qualities which obscure them and reports them as they are 'in themselves.' But does he place his easel wherever he happens first to perceive the view? Hardly. He saunters around the dale, goes a way into it, then withdraws to a considerable distance, climbs a nearby hill and perhaps watches through all the morning hours. He is hunting for the one best perspective. He knows that the poplars and the tilt of the land, and the angle of light and the mist and everything else combine in an infinite variety of ways, according to the vantage of the

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observer; and that some few of these combinations bring out the pure values of the much-sought blues and grays much more faithfully than all the others. In seeking one of them, the artist is doing the very same thing that Maupassant does when he tells the story of the Horla as the victim of the monster experiences it; and the same thing that Hawthorne does when he narrates *The Birthmark* as he himself senses the episodes.

The difference between the two points of view is profound, and yet they are intimately related, as different things often are.

*The first point of view expresses the artist's sensitivity, wish or belief toward a subject. The second point of view expresses the arrangement of some particular material which makes conspicuous some quality of the latter which the artist wishes to report. This quality may or may not happen to be one of those chosen by the artist for expression. It may merely serve to express something else.*

For clarity, then, we must give names to each. The first I shall call *the artist's attitude*, and the second *the angle of narration*. Concerning the former something will be said in sections 5 and 6 below. We now turn to the angle of narration.

3. *The angle of narration.* There are three typical angles of narration:

- a. The pure objective.
- b. The angle of the inactive witness or hearer.
- c. The angle of a participant.
  - i. A subordinate character.
  - ii. A dominant character.

a. *The objective.* This might be called the photographer's point of view, did not the epithet suggest mechanical accuracy and inartistic realism. The truth of the metaphor, however, is illuminating. In the first place, like the working of a camera plate, objective

narrative seems wholly impersonal; and, secondly, the narrator stands at a distance from the events he records, no less than the photographer does. These are the sure marks of the angle, and there is no other.)

Few stories have been told in this manner from start to finish, though a host are predominantly. Maupassant's *The Piece of String* and *The Necklace* nowhere reveal the events or characters as they might have appeared to some eye-witness or active participant in the action. The feelings, thoughts, and deeds of Maître Hauchecorne and the Loiseles are chronicled as a physician on a filing card might record the temperature, pulse and delirium of a fever patient. Indeed, the ending of *The Piece of String* might well be an excerpt from a hospital report:

He gnawed his nails, and exhausted himself in vain efforts.

He grew perceptibly thinner.

Now the jokers asked him to tell the story of *The Piece of String* for their amusement, as a soldier who has seen service is asked to tell about his battles. His mind, attacked at its source, grew feeble.

Late in December he took to his bed.

In the first days of January he died, and in the delirium of the death agony he protested his innocence, repeating:

"A little piece of string—a little piece of string—see, here it is, m'sieu' mayor."

✓ In all this you are not aware of the onlookers, nor do you see the tragedy through Hauchecorne's eyes. You get only the bald facts, and they speak for themselves. *Their intrinsic and immediate power is the measure of the appropriateness of the objective angle of narration.* This is the almost invariable rule. The more obvious and the more intense a story's events are, the more natural and successful the objective treatment will prove (if it can be employed at all). This becomes almost self-evident, once you scrutinize an instance. A plot whose every develop-

ment is as clear as day certainly calls for no interpretation, no posing, in order to sharpen it. And if its single effect is intense, what need is there of adding somebody's feelings and thoughts toward it? The story tells itself.

It is not strange, then, that the best authors have seldom chosen the objective treatment without recourse to some other perspective in conjunction with it. This casts no reflection upon their technical skill; it only means that they do not conjure up or at least dislike to write about the obvious and the terrific. They are more interested in complications and aspects of human nature which call for diagnosis. Such affairs, not being self-evident, must be put in their true light; they must be shown up by somebody who perceives them from the one angle which most effectively reveals their bearings.

A story told objectively throughout develops a speed and a directness rarely attained in any other way. It has no philosophical overture, no interpolations by the narrator, and very few elaborate descriptive passages. It also tends to employ only those events whose full significance is visible or audible to any witness. Hence it portrays no more of an emotion or a thought than straightway manifests itself unequivocally in outward action. For just so would a reporter write who had no inner, secret knowledge of what was passing in the characters' minds.

The limitations of the objective treatment now appear. The consequences of fortune or misfortune upon a fixed human type it can present with matchless brilliancy. And the instinctive behavior of a fixed human type it can also render well. But it cannot depict the great crises of character. The invisible forces of life which do battle against one another in the mind of one who stands at a crossroads, the countering of impulse with impulse,

the still reasoning against vain pride or empty panic, the trembling anticipations, and the sting of memories—all these lie beyond its power.

Once more, for corroboration, turn to Maupassant. Beyond dispute he is the master of masters in the realm of the dramatic story; also he champions the objective treatment with unreasonable pertinacity. He and all his disciples extol the impersonal manner above every other. And yet the master himself forsakes it, every time he dips into psychological analysis. Look once more to *A Coward*, and you will find many passages like these:

A single thought hovered over his mind—‘a duel’—without arousing any emotion whatsoever. He had done what he should have done; he had shown himself to be what he ought to be.

He examined these assembled letters, which seemed to him mysterious, full of vague meaning. Georges Lamil! Who was this man? What was his business? Why had he stared at that lady in such a way? Was it not disgusting that a stranger, an unknown, should cause such a change in one’s life . . . ? No, of course he was not afraid, as he had determined to carry the thing through, as his mind was fully made up to fight, and not to tremble.

Is it the narrator who says the viscount has done what he should have done? No, that is the viscount’s own interpretation. Does Maupassant call it disgusting that a stranger should upset another’s life? No again. The coward so construes the affair. And, what is still more to the point, these are thoughts which no objective narrator could observe or even infer, inasmuch as they find no expression in the viscount’s outward acts.

Maupassant wisely sacrificed his theory for art’s sake; he shifts here back and forth from impersonal narrative to the viscount’s point of view, to meet the demands now of visible drama and now of the inner

conflict. And so too does every skilled writer of psychological stories.

✓The objective treatment also is ill suited to the atmosphere story, though not incompatible with it. Unlike other types, the atmosphere story demands a certain wealth and delicacy of descriptive detail, inasmuch as it secures its strongest effect in a unified sensuous impression. Now, whether we are sharply aware of it or not, there is in us a natural tendency to associate such an impression with a person who is impressed; for the emotions that are woven into every well wrought description of places or people are thoroughly human, which is to say highly individual. Only one man in the world could experience that particular and unique blend of colors and fitting shadows and portentous little noises which filled the shop after Markheim slew the dealer. Only one man in the world could see and feel what Ligeia's husband did in his will-haunted bridal chamber. And so it fits in best with our long habituated expectations to let the report of such opulent sceneries come from a character in the story or, less appropriately, from an inactive witness. I cannot recall any famous atmosphere story which has been objectively told. And again let me cite the high priest of the objectivistic cult: in *Moonlight* Maupassant narrates the atmospheric movement (just before the dénouement) from the Abbé Marignan's point of view.

b. *The angle of the inactive witness or hearer.* This treatment is that which commonly yields an opening like that of Turgenieff's *The Jew*:

"Pray tell us a story, Colonel," we said at last to Nikolai Ilitch. The Colonel smiled, emitted a stream of tobacco smoke through his moustache, passed his hand over his gray hair, stared at us, and meditated. . . .  
"Well then, listen," he began.

"It happened in the year '13, before Dantzig. I was then," etc., etc.

In contrast to the highly artificial, sophisticated objective treatment, this one is naïve and instinctive. In a state of nature no man who has lived through an adventure, waking or dreaming, detaches himself from it in the telling. He says: 'I saw the man strike down his wife, and I heard her cry as she fell. I tell you! I went faint at the sight!' As literature has grown out of just such spoken narrative, it has inevitably brought over into the more deliberate printed form this habit.

Being natural, the treatment is supposed to lend an air of reality to the narrative; and doubtless it does so when you know and trust the narrator, or when you have some other reason to suppose that the report is a matter of fact. A newspaper account of, say, a fire is likely to be more convincing, if it quotes an eye-witness at length; but it is, only because it purports to be true anyhow. Once forsake this intention, though, and the device loses all force. Thus it happens in literature. A novel or a story does not pretend to give straight facts, and only very young children fancy that it does. Fiction is fiction, and need not bolster itself with pretenses. If, then, the writer is to tell his story from the angle of the inactive witness or hearer, he must do so, not for the sake of creating the illusion of reality, but only in order to bring out the genuine story values, namely the dramatic action or the single effect. Now, under what circumstances are these heightened or clarified thereby? There are four conspicuous cases.

i. The surest case is that in which the narrator's mannerisms are an integral part of the single effect. Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Stories* illustrate this perfectly (though most of them are not genuine short stories). Half the charm of his queer tales from folk-lore

resides in old Uncle Remus, his dialect, and his quaint asides. So too with Kipling's Mulvaney stories, though in less degree; and, were Mulvaney wholly inactive in them, they would be a more pertinent instance for us.

ii. A second case is detective and mystery stories. One of the method's gravest defects here becomes a virtue. The defect is its tendency to break up the main action, either by shifting the point of view back and forth between that of a character and that of the narrator, or else by cluttering the pages with the narrator's explanations and personal interpolations. Insufferable as all this is in most stories, it serves the mystery-monger well. It confuses and distracts the reader by shunting his attention frequently from the plot events to the thoughts of the narrator. Thus the connection between events is obscured, and they become more of a mystery than if they were given bald and direct,—which is precisely what the writer desires. We have already discussed this matter under the head of indirect plot action; but it is well to consider again the famous stories which exemplify the above principle. In *Ligeia*, which, though vastly more than a mystery story, is overhung with mystery, the narrator is almost an inactive witness of the events. *The Gold Bug* is narrated by Legrand's friend, who plays such a trifling part in the plot action that we scarcely have the right to esteem him a character. *The Purloined Letter* is told by Dupin's acquaintance, who is an absolute zero in the tale. Conan Doyle brings in the passive Dr. Watson to twist and obfuscate the problems of crime which Sherlock Holmes confronts. William J. Locke, too, lets himself narrate many of the *Joyous Adventures of Aristide Pujol*. The list might be lengthened indefinitely, with some of E. W. Hornung's *Witching Hill Stories* well toward the bottom of it.

Unfortunately, this method is too easy; for the inactive

narrator may jumble up the circumstances of the story so that all the great detectives in Christendom could not unravel it on his evidence alone. Realizing this, many good writers are tempted to fall back upon it, just to spare themselves the hard work of making the complications themselves mysterious. Probably half the stories so told could be handled otherwise, and to great advantage. How simple it would have been for G. K. Chesterton to have cast his Father Brown stories in that mould! And how refreshing to find them in another. How easy for Henry Sydnor Harrison to have put his story of *Mrs. Hinch*<sup>1</sup> into the mouth of a wayfarer who overheard these amazing women in the Subway and followed them curiously! And what a wonderful thriller he has produced by not doing that!

iii. A third instance of the method's utility is that of the story in which the dramatic quality of the plot can be brought out only by an impartial interpretation of the characters. The objective treatment will not suffice here inasmuch as it does not interpret; and the point of view of an active character will fail because, if consistent and true, it will not be fair to the other characters. There remains then only the method we are now considering.

A flawless specimen of this type is James Hopper's *Memories in Men's Souls*, which the student is advised to study closely. Its theme does not appear directly in the plot incidents; it is a thought which the romance awakens in the narrator. Hence, if the story were told objectively, we should get the romance, but not its import; and it is this import which contributes heavily to the single effect. On the other hand, were the romance told as it was seen by the business man or his sweetheart or her malevolent uncle, it would cease to be romance.

<sup>1</sup> *McClure's*, Sept., 1911



To the first two it was a sickening catastrophe from start to finish; and from the uncle's point of view, only the first brief movement could have been told at all, for he did not witness nor hear of the climax. Half the power of this exquisite narrative springs from the delicate veiling of the lovers' feelings at the climax. They are not suppressed—on the contrary, they are as clear as day. They are revealed by the narrator's personal conjectures as to what they must have been; and as he conjectures, he recalls the manner of the hero when the latter laid bare to him the whole adventure. No other device could vie with this here.

iv. The fourth and last story type admitting of this treatment is the atmosphere story. As we have seen, descriptive events integrate best when frankly narrated from the point of view of somebody who witnesses the places and people described. The inactive witness or hearer may be that somebody, whenever the atmosphere does not figure so intimately in the plot action that its part cannot be understood save from an active character's point of view. For instance, the atmospheric effect in *A Descent into the Maelstrom* is not a dynamic factor in the adventure. That is to say, the fisherman was not sucked into the vortex by the hypnotic power of its appearance; nor is his behavior in any other way influenced by the color of the insane waters, or their roar, or the horrible shape of the gigantic funnel. Not these sensuous qualities but the thought of the consequences of his position finally brought him to that calm, almost disinterested contemplative reflection which lies beyond fear and which delivered him from the peril. Hence the atmosphere is painted largely by the fisherman's visitor. In *Markheim*, on the contrary, the ticking of the clocks in the shop and the patter of rain on the attic roof and the scurrying shuffle of wayfarers' feet outside are not mere scenic

trimmings. They lay hold of the murderer, they stir up vague fears in him, they prod him to think hard over his plight; and, of these thoughts the vision is born on which the action of the whole story hinges. How impossible, then, to portray the fantastic interior save through Markheim's own eyes and ears—and conscience!

c. *The angle of a participant.* In choosing the point of view of an active character, the writer who has grasped the principles above set forth will readily decide whether he ought to see the events through the eyes of a minor personage or in the dominant character's perspective. For, once it is clear that some active character should be chosen, the very reasons which settle that will also designate the particular character to be employed. Therefore we may discuss this narrative method without regard to the status of the character in the story.

As usual, the ultimate criterion is the double ideal of the short story. The aim being to bring out both the dramatic quality and the single effect, is it not self-evident that an active character's point of view shall be chosen only when it best reveals the particular swing and flavor of the plot? And all we have to ask is: when and where does it do that? We find two cases.

i. First and most conspicuously, it does it in every story which aims primarily to depict the actual workings of character in a moral crisis. For only the character himself can know and feel the forces at work; and it is nothing but that interplay of forces which constitutes the story material. Once more, *Markheim* may be passed out as a perfect sample.

ii. The second type calling for this angle is the complication story which turns upon an active character's ignorance or misunderstanding. In *The Tragic Years*, by B. Paul Newman,<sup>1</sup> the main action is thus told, because

<sup>1</sup> *Everybody's*, May, 1910.

every consequential turn in it happens as a result of the lawyer's being ignorant of his son's nature. In that charming piece of sentiment, *The Poet Who Saved His Youth*, by Helen Sterling Thomas,<sup>1</sup> it is Peter's ignorance about the one fervent admirer of his verse which helps mightily to save his youth. And the whole point of *Old Johnnie*, by Barry Benefield,<sup>2</sup> turns upon Johnnie's mistaking a dressmaker's dummy for a live and wicked man. Hence again the participant's point of view is correctly taken.

4. *Angle of narration and grammatical form.* In the leading text-books on story technique the angle of narration and the grammatical form of narration (that is, the use of the first or the third person) are hopelessly confused and discussed as though they were identical. Esenwein even goes so far as to classify the angles of narration as varieties of the grammatical form,—which is about as absurd as to classify the story characters with respect to the number of syllables in their names. The truth is, there is no significant connection whatever between the perspective and the use of 'I' or 'he'. And the absolute proof of this is given in the fact that *both the second and the third angles of narration may be correctly indicated in either the first or the third person.* For instance, suppose that Jones' valet saw Jones kill Smith, and that, for some dramatic reason, the happenings that culminated in this tragedy are best told from the valet's point of view. Then the narrative may run thus:

Yes, I was Jones' valet when he killed that scoundrel, Smith. A mysterious affair, sir; and though it's ten years gone, I've not stopped wondering yet why my master did it, etc., *ad lib.*

<sup>1</sup> *McClure's*, July, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> *Scribner's*, Dec., 1911.

Or it may with equal accuracy run thus:

As he laid away Jones' shirts in the mahogany dresser, the valet let his eyes wander to the half-open door through which the sound of angry voices drifted. Yes, that was Mr. Smith in there, swearing. Why had he been coming so often of late? And why did Mr. Jones rage for hours after the fellow had gone? The valet shook his head . . . etc., and also *ad lib.*

The reader may perform a similar experiment with the third angle. And he may do so even with the purely objective story too, which, one might reasonably suppose, could be narrated only in the third person. It is conceivable, for instance, that a witness or minor participant in an episode might recount the latter impersonally and yet speak in the first person. He might say: "I was standing on the drug store steps when the messenger came up. He thrust the letter into my hand and fell exhausted . . . " This use of 'I' is quite objective and impersonal; it is merely a way of naming a participant in the story. It does not bring with it the slightest distortion or artificial arrangement of circumstances. It does not express feeling or opinion. It is as colorless and transparent as 'John Smith' or 'he'. Cases like these prove that it cannot be the perspective which decides the grammatical form. On the contrary, *the latter is properly determined by the material of the particular story*, even as the perspective itself is.

## EXERCISES

Find the angle of narration which will best bring out the seriousness of the following episode. Find the angle that shows up the harshness of the legal technicality which holds a poor man under such circumstance. Find the angle which emphasizes the negro's foolishness.

Frank Ayers, a negro driver of the Street Cleaning Department, wearing his uniform, was arraigned in the Men's Night Court last evening on a charge of petty larceny, and declared that the city's delay in paying employes had driven him to steal. He pleaded guilty to the theft of a bottle of catsup, three bottles of Oxford sauce, one box of herring, a jar of jelly, and a package of macaroni.

His wife and children were starving and he had also been forced to go without food, he told Magistrate House, because he could not get the money the city owed him. His story so impressed Magistrate House that he asked the complainant, William H. Dillon, a store detective, if he intended to press the charge.

Magistrate House told Ayers he felt sorry for him, but could not do otherwise than hold him for trial in Special Sessions.

Street Cleaning Commissioner Edwards said last night that there had been a delay of a week or two in paying the employes of his department, because of a new system which required the approval of the Civil Service Commission before the pay rolls go to the Controller. Commissioner Edwards said the men would get their pay in a day or two.

What is the angle of narration in each of the following? Is the angle well chosen? Explain your answer accurately. Is the artist's attitude discernible at all? If so, describe it.

1. Hamlin, Pauline Worth—*The Gold Pot*. (*American*, July, 1912.)
2. Child, Richard Washburn—*The Eyes of the Gazelle*. (*Harper's*, April, 1912.)
3. Freeman, Mary Wilkins—*The Steeple*. (*Hampton's*, Oct., 1911.)
4. Dudeney, Mrs. Henry—*The Secret Shelf*. (*Harper's*, July, 1912.)

In Vol. 8 of the collection entitled *Stories by American Authors* (Scribner's) you will find a story by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps called *Zerviah Hope*, which is hopelessly botched because the author has not duly regarded the angle of narration. Find what this angle should be and rewrite the story from it, taking pains not to modify the incidents and character traits.

5. *The artist's attitude.* We have now to consider briefly that other kind of point of view which, at the close of section 2 above, we distinguished from the angle of narration. About it we cannot say much, for it and its problems lie far beyond the province of this book. The artist's attitude is not a matter of technique. It is what it is, and all attempts to guide it by formulas are futile. I do not mean that a teacher cannot profoundly influence a student's tastes and even his natural manner of expression. He certainly can. But this influence cannot be charted, and still less can it be located anywhere in the materials or the methods of fiction. It works through discussions about the nature of things, through debates over ideals, through study of rights and wrongs. In short, it is an influence of culture; and, like culture, it is neither reading, writing, nor arithmetic, nor any other body of fact or technique. It is the directing of appetities, likes and dislikes, sensitivities and prejudices.

This cultural influence may be insignificant or enormous, as we see from a comparison of the two types of literary genius, the genius from within and the genius from without. The former, of whom Poe is the perfect specimen, is endowed with a unique fancy and a preference for certain thoughts and emotions to which his environment neither adds nor takes away appreciably. The latter type, which is best exemplified in our own country by Hawthorne, likewise possess great native gifts; but these, under the influence of his training and surroundings, are directed toward the familiar ideals and beliefs of early New England. How far one's aptitudes may thus be guided depends entirely upon the individual and the themes to which he is to be turned. And, as his choice of themes inevitably precedes his writing about

them, so his attitude precedes all literary manipulation.

6. *The artist's attitude and his style.* In ordinary discourse 'style' is a blanket term covering at least three things: (1) the qualities of a narrative which are determined by the theme and the plot action; (2) the qualities of grammar and language, as such; and (3) the qualities which express the author's attitude toward the theme or plot action. In most cases these three may be distinguished readily enough; but an illustration is not amiss. Suppose you are writing a story in which, at a critical moment, the heroine dropped her eyes demurely under the gaze of a jealously suspicious admirer; and he, misunderstanding her act, hurled an accusation or stalked off or caught her hand or did something else which complicated affairs vitally. If, now, you write: 'The girl gazed at the carpet, feigning modesty'—the mere mention of the act would be a case of the first 'style'. If you write 'feigning modesty', instead of the neater adverb, 'demurely', this is the second 'style'. And if, finally, your scorn for the heroine runs away with you, and you let it speak out in the sentence, thus: 'The sly-boots gazed at the carpet feigning modesty'—then you are exhibiting 'style' number three, provided that there is, in the plot itself, no dramatic necessity for *your* calling the girl names.

The student may have been wondering throughout this book why it does not preach style and tell how to attain it. The explanation is now at hand.

*Style, in the first sense, is the result of mastering story technique; in the second sense, it is the result of mastering grammar and rhetoric; and, in the third sense, it is the result of the artist's attitude toward his material and all that pertains to it.*

Now, this book is devoted to the problems of technique; hence, what of style derives from the manipulation of dramatic material is to be attained only by becoming



skilful in that manipulation. For, to repeat with another accent, style is not a quality in the material, but a *consequence* of handling the latter. In the second place, linguistic style lies beyond the present undertaking. The pursuit of it should largely precede technique, inasmuch as many structural problems—and, above all, the producing of the single effect—call for considerable facility with words. Finally, style that expresses the author's point of view is gained only through that point of view. But this is the result of natural disposition and culture. To seek these in technique would be as foolish as to seek, in elocution and stagecraft, the power of composing Hamlet's soliloquy.

## SUB-CHAPTER E.—ATMOSPHERE.

1. *What atmosphere is.* In the painter's art atmosphere means 'the feeling or effect, as of air, light, space, or warmth, given as an environment of any subject'. (Standard Dictionary.) Thus, the atmosphere of Rembrandt's masterpiece, *The Night Watch*, is the quite indescribable enrichening influence of a peculiarly mellow amber light which suffuses the scene. In literature the word describes a quality of the story setting and staging. It is *the emotional flavor of the place and time in which the dramatic events unfold*. For instance, in Stevenson's tale, *The Merry Men*, it is the feeling awakened by the Scotch coast around Aros, where 'great granite rocks . . . go down together in troops into the sea, like cattle on a summer's day.'

There they stand, for all the world like their neighbors ashore; only the salt water sobbing between them instead of the quiet earth, and clots of sea-pink blooming on their sides instead of heather, and the great sea conger to wreath about the base of them instead of the poisonous viper of the land. . . .

I have often been out there in a dead calm at the slack of the tide; and a strange place it is, with the sea swirling and coming up and boiling like the cauldrons of a linn, and now and again a little dancing mutter of sound as though the Roost were talking to itself.

Many students get the notion that environment is atmosphere. And so they fall into the technical blunder of trying to produce atmosphere by elaborate descriptions of scenery. Their belief is false, and their practice only occasionally sound. The atmosphere is, be it repeated, the *impression* which environment makes upon the

beholder and which the beholder, in writing, seeks to convey to his readers.<sup>1</sup>

It is, if you will allow the phrase, the rock-and-water feeling which Aros aroused in Stevenson. This feeling is not in the rocks and the sea; it is in their beholder. They only stir him; the response is his own, private, unique, and in some respects spontaneous.

This response is quite mysterious. Nothing in the scene clearly accounts for its precise quality, any more than the known chemical structure of alcohol explains the unique exhilaration that comes from drinking wine. Poe has given perfect utterance to this fact in his matchless atmosphere story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, from which we cannot cite too often:

What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among

<sup>1</sup>I cannot resist calling attention to the error of some excellent critics and scholars who give to the art of producing atmosphere the name of Impressionism. Nothing warrants this designation. Impressionism is the theory and practice of reporting scenes and events in terms of their immediately sensed colors, sounds, forms, flavors, and other primitive qualities. The impressionist's ideal is to render only that much of the world which is given to him in raw sensation. The ideal of the atmospheric painter or writer, on the contrary, is to transmit the peculiar and full reality of scenes. To accomplish this, he does not limit himself to his own immediate impressions. He often draws upon his subtlest analogies and his most tediously wrought reflections. Anything that will produce the desired effect upon the reader is eligible. Of course, it commonly happens that a writer of atmosphere uses impressionistic material, but this is only because the latter chances to convey the desired effect. His very next scene may be handled in a wholly different manner.

considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression. . . .

This conjecture of Poe's has been confirmed by modern psychology in many fascinating experiments. Even in simple geometrical figures, minute alterations produce a complete transformation of one's feeling toward them. Erase from a circle only a very small arc, and instantly your perception of it is tinged afresh; and your thoughts sent scurrying up strange little lanes and alleys of memory. You may now say, with infinitesimal pain, that a perfect figure has been marred; and the ruin of it may, of a sudden, resemble C, or perhaps the ground plan of a corral, or the cross-section of a bomb, or any of a thousand other queer things. To physician and psychologist, this hypersensitivity of the normal mind to microscopical changes in objects perceived is a matter of absorbing interest. To the story writer it is a source of immeasurable artistic possibilities. Thanks to it, the variety of esthetic effects in the handling of even commonplace scenes is prodigious. In comparison with it, man's impressions of dramatic action are singularly few.

2. *Atmosphere as the single effect of a story.* This last circumstance tempts many a novice to write atmosphere stories. And almost inevitably he comes to grief, because the atmosphere story is very different from a story with atmosphere. This distinction, which wiser heads than his frequently overlook, must now be explained.

Every story whose setting must be staged at all may have atmosphere. *A Lover of Flowers*, or almost any other of Mary Wilkins Freeman's New England sketches, has it unmistakably. *A Pair of Patient Lovers*, like most of Howells' stories, also possesses it in measurable degree.

Likewise with the works of nearly every experienced author. Thin it may be, or unconvincing; yet it is there. You receive a definite impression and feeling of the place and time in which the events unfold. The two are not merely reported to you. Something of their lights and shadows reaches you through the printed page; the breezes from the written hills cool you, and in your heart burns warm the cheer of storied firesides.

But usually the atmosphere differs in emotional value from the characters and the plot action. Sometimes it stands in sharp contrast to the latter pair; as in *Moonlight*, where the languorous, dreamy, bewitching midsummer night shines with a light most unlike that in the hard face of the bigoted, woman-hating Abbé. And when there is no such contrast, the atmosphere is almost certain to play a subordinate part in toning the story, as in *The Piece of String*, where the vivid picture of market-day at Goderville harmonizes with the earthy Norman thrift, slyness, and simple honesty of the people in the tragedy. Now, in neither of these typical instances have we an atmosphere story, because their setting does not fix the narrative's tone, dominate it, and produce its single effect. All of which is a negative way of saying that *the atmosphere story is one in which character and complication are integrated with and intensify the setting, which latter produces the single effect.* As Stevenson puts it, in his much-quoted conversation with Graham Balfour: "You may take a certain atmosphere and get action and persons to express and realize it. I'll give you an example—*The Merry Men*. There I began with the feeling of one of those islands on the west coast of Scotland, and I gradually developed the story to express the sentiment with which the coast affected me."

3. *Why the atmosphere story is difficult.* A brief consideration of this structural peculiarity reveals the in-

trinsic difficulty of the atmosphere story. When the setting of an episode fixes the tone, and the other dramatic factors simply intensify it, obviously the emotions aroused by the characters and by the events must resemble, in some detectible measure, the emotions of the atmosphere. If the scene is pervaded with gloom, the hero must stalk up and down his dim apartment, gnawing his beard. If, on the contrary, the hills clap their hands for joy, the heroine must join in smartly. This sounds like a very simple formula, but it is not. Two mighty obstacles confront the writer: (a) the narrow range of atmospheric effects, and (b) the lack of harmony between man and Nature, with respect to the feelings each arouses in an observer.

a. *The narrow range of atmospheric effects.* In asserting that the range of atmospheric effects is narrow, we seem to be contradicting our previous statement about their prodigious variety. Range and variety, however, do not mean the same. Range means the extent of variation; as when we speak of the range of the human voice. The distance separating the extreme members of any class or species is the range of that species. Variety, on the other hand, refers to the number of distinctions within the species. A moment's reflection on these terms will assure you that no connection exists between the range and the variety of anything in the world. For instance, the range of a piano—seven octaves and a quarter—exceeds that of a violin which covers about three octaves. But the variety of a violin is many times as great as that of a piano, for the piano can sound only twelve different tones between each octave, while the violin readily sounds fifty or more, whose differences only the most sensitive ear can detect.

Now, this contrast appears in all the activities of the human mind. The variety of odors which the normal man

senses is very great, but it is slight beside that of the lights and colors which he readily perceives. He distinguishes a few thousand smells—four or five, at most; but his eye reveals to him over thirty-six thousand hues. Nevertheless, the range of the odors is incomparably vaster than that of colors. The difference between the smell of sandalwood and that of sour milk is wider than the difference between the gayest yellow and the dulllest dark blue. Turpentine is more unlike roasted coffee than green is unlike red. And so generally, even in those complex and elusive feelings which the story teller stirs up.

Take as a well marked instance the emotions awakened by the contemplation of scenery. No two landscapes make quite the same impression upon the spectator, and so there are truly as many distinct emotions as there are combinations of sunlight, breeze, outdoor warmth, hills, dells, and crags. But, on the other hand, between the most terrible, most overwhelming of Nature's patterns and the gentlest of her green fields and still waters, the difference of *quality* is comparatively slight. But few fundamental types appear; there is the frightfulness of the volcanic eruption; the sublimity of iceberg, mountain, and roaring mid-ocean; the depressing dulness of a gray prairie day; the slumbrous comfort of summer afternoon; and a few other varieties. But all the pleasant impressions resemble one another in some underlying characteristic in which a simple animal joy predominates, while all the unpleasant seem merely so many shadings of three things: panic, temperature, and color feelings. I do not believe that the latter reduce to such a simple triad of factors. Air pressure and the movements of physical objects certainly give rise to their own peculiar feelings, although I seldom find myself able to distinguish these in contemplating a landscape. Doubtless many other forces are at work here too. But the question of

fact here is quite irrelevant to our inquiry, inasmuch as we are dealing exclusively with the quality of impressions; and beyond all dispute the latter show nothing of the tremendous difference which everybody feels in contemplating the deeds of men.

b. *The lack of harmony between the two kinds of feelings.* Human acts seem to fall into great constellations which are farther apart than the stars. Consider only those two which most concern the writer of fiction: tragedy and comedy. They have nothing whatever in common, insofar as the quality of their emotions is concerned. They differ in that same profound manner in which hircine odors differ from fragrances. It is a difference, not of degree, but of kind. You cannot pass from one to the other by slight gradations, as you can pass from the joy of a noontide landscape to the melancholy of sunset simply by reducing the amount of light that falls upon the scene. A still sharper contrast might be drawn between esthetic and moral feelings, which, in spite of an indubitable kinship in their origins, fall quite apart in their mature modes. But such analyses belong to esthetics, not to the technique of fiction; so we must waive them. We have made our point, that the range of atmospheric effects is slight; and, in bringing this out, we have also indicated the wider scope of emotions drawn from human conduct, which is the subject matter of dramatic narrative. We now return to our technical issue: what trouble does all this make for the writer of atmosphere stories?

The trouble is that, because of the naturally wide range of dramatic qualities (those of character and complication, I mean), *these cannot be forced to intensify the quality of the story setting except by our artificially narrowing them.* And this narrowing can generally be accomplished only through the use of abnormal or impossible characters and complications. But to work up such material into coherent



action is a task of exceeding difficulty, calling for the highest order of creative imagination. In the final analysis, it is hard because both the purpose of it and the procedure run contrary to our habits of life. For an elucidation of these points, let us once more inspect *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

The 'insufferable gloom' which is the single effect here has been intensified with consummate skill by the character delineation of Roderick Usher and his sister and by the insidious, mystifying catastrophes befalling them and their domicile. But observe at what cost this has been accomplished. Gloom is deepened only by whatsoever produces gloom. And the only thing in human nature which produces it is the mood itself, or at least some of its bodily manifestations. In Nature, the gray of low-hung clouds or of a winter sea may evoke that hue of melancholy; but the gray of aged hairs or of anemic cheeks will not. In other words, *the causes of the mood in Nature and in man are disparate; the former induces it through simple colors and sounds and forms, while the latter does so only through sympathetically affecting his beholder.* The beholder must perceive such lineaments and behavior as the guest of Roderick Usher noted in his host. Then will the feelings associated with them well up in their witness.<sup>1</sup> It is by a sort of instinctive interpretation—or shall we say an imitation?—that this happens, whereas, in the

<sup>1</sup>This is not what happens in perceiving a humorous character; for what amuses the spectator of a man who is doing something comical may not be comical to the man himself. It may be humiliating and painful. But this exception does not detract from its present application to the atmosphere story. And the reason is that the comic cannot be used as the single effect of an atmosphere story, inasmuch as there is no humor in mere Nature. It is never the setting which supplies that peculiar and baffling incongruity that moves us to laughter. The comic exists only in thought about intents, ideals, and achievements.

melancholy brought on by natural scenes, there seems to be nothing more than a little understood chemical process which certain light waves, air pressures, and temperatures set up in the nervous system.

Now, it happens—probably by the merest coincidence—that some of the feelings caused by these chemisms closely resemble those associated with certain thoughts. Thus the melancholy of a dull landscape is much like the melancholy attending Usher's thought of Lady Madeline's approaching dissolution. Hence it is that the latter may be used to intensify the former. *But there are very few thoughtful feelings which resemble the other kind sufficiently to be so employed.* The feelings of dramatic action and the still larger, more alien class of ethical emotions have no counterpart in mere scenic effects; at most, they remotely suggest a few of the latter. Therefore, they cannot serve to intensify atmosphere. *And because of this a character which is used to this end must almost invariably be depicted so as to present, in strong exaggeration, some undramatic, non-ethical, and even passive trait.* Roderick Usher perfectly illustrates this limitation. In mien and behavior he is a mortal the like of which never walked this earth of ours.

. . . The character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve: . . . these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. . . . The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture,

it floated rather than fell about the face, *I could not, even with effort, connect its arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.*

Please note this very last clause, which I have italicized. To my mind it indicates that Poe comprehended and deliberately practiced the very principle of character drawing just laid down. For the sake of deepening the insufferable gloom of the setting, he sacrificed the very humanity of Usher. Every succeeding paragraph of the story confirms this a little more. Ask yourself about Usher's conduct. Think of his fluctuating voice, "varying rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seem utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard . . . ." Was there ever such a voice? And does the lost drunkard possess it? I do not believe it, and neither did Poe. Usher's 'morbid acuteness of the senses', on the other hand, is commonly found, but always in neurasthenics and other ailing folk. Likewise with his vague, objectless fears. But his wild improvisations on the guitar, his phantasmagoric paintings, his spontaneous poetizing, and the wild reading from insane books,—all these *in combination* can belong only to a dream-creature. He is the passive victim of circumstances. He is stripped of all moral power, as far removed from virtue and vice as the lowest brutes are. And there resides in him no other impulse, no other appetite, no other idea, no other purpose save such as are born of his morbidity. In short, he is not a man—as Poe says candidly—but a commiserable lunatic, and such a one as alienist never looked upon.

If, now, intensification of the setting requires that human nature be thus falsified, does not the discomfiture

of the would-be writer of atmosphere stories appear without further ado? Just as it is easy to lie magnificently but very hard to lie persuasively, so it is simple enough to twist the stuff of human life into terrifically sombre or horrible or exciting fictions but almost impossible to make the people in such fictions coherent enough to produce the illusion of life. The ultimate cause of this difficulty we have already mentioned. It is the very fact to which Poe alludes with such timely acumen: the quality of each individual object we perceive does not reside in its parts or elements, as such, but in some elusive peculiarity of their combination and interrelating. To speak in the tongue of psychology, each entity has its own unique form-quality; and what this is, no man can deduce from the thing's isolated constituents. It follows, then, that the writer who disintegrates, in imagination, a human life and then integrates some of the fragments, to heighten the atmosphere's quality, must proceed blindly and by the merest guess-work, nine times out of ten.

Few are the men who have triumphed over this obstacle, and even they bear witness to its stubbornness. Their pages show many a scar of battle with the all-but-impossible. Poe's heroes and villains, marvelously constructed though they are, are not people at all. Stevenson's are vastly more human and comprehensible, although often either puppets with only clothes and mien to match the atmosphere—as in *The Merry Men*—or else not intensifiers at all—as in *Will o' the Mill*, where the love story of the miller's boy and the parson's Marjory, though profoundly colored and shaped by the environment, nevertheless takes its own course and turns the reader from the wonderful atmosphere. Even more instructive than Poe and Stevenson, though, is Joseph Conrad, who certainly ranks as the master of masters in the narrow, lofty kingdom of Atmosphere. His finest work, *Almayer's*

*Folly*, certainly equals the best of Poe, who is Conrad's only serious rival. To quote a recent reviewer: "What impresses one most in re-reading this tragedy of a Bornean river is the wonderful color-effects that lie hidden in its words. The story is almost subordinate in interest to the tawny Oriental landscape, with its loneliness, treachery, and hint of life's brevity. . . . Over against the ineffectual littleness of the men who creep along the lonely river's banks is set the mighty majesty of nature. It is this element which lends the story grandeur and helps it to outwear time."<sup>1</sup> This comment accurately touches both the strength and the weakness of Conrad, and so of the atmosphere story as a species. The landscape subordinates the story, as it should; but in doing so it minimizes dramatic movement and integrity of character. Hence the result is, if nothing worse, sluggish; and it is very likely to give us, instead of people, fantastic fragments and jumbles of human traits. Now, by sheer genius, Conrad shuns this graver catastrophe, but he falls victim to the lesser one. Let the student read carefully—and sympathetically—Conrad's collection of short stories entitled *Tales of Unrest*.<sup>2</sup> He will find that, while the dramatic conceptions are strong, they drag, at times most painfully. The very shadows on the ground are stumbling-blocks to the people here, the breezes halt their speech, and the day's heat wilts their judgment. To be sure, all this is not enough to mar the special beauty of Conrad very much, and it is a slight failure in comparison with his awe-inspiring power of description. But it exemplifies the atmosphere story's supreme difficulty where this difficulty has been most nearly overcome.

3. *The natural theme of the atmosphere story.* The student who has thoughtfully followed the above com-

<sup>1</sup>Coningsby Dawson, in *Everybody's*, September, 1912.

<sup>2</sup>*Scribner's*.

ments will doubtless discover for himself that there is at least one subject and one type of plot which can turn to profit all the inconveniences of the atmosphere story. It is the story of the triumphant environment; of which there are two opposite types. The first is the story wherein we see men and women moulded by the blind forces of Nature, and human beliefs and aspirations shown to be vain delusions, empty hopes in a hopeless world. Of this sort is everything that Thomas Hardy has written. His minor tales, such as *Life's Little Ironies*, smoothly fit Prosser Hall Frye's characterization of their author's theme:

But with him this varied region (Egdon Heath, the locus of *The Return of the Native*) . . . is no longer mere scenery, the spectacular decoration of an indifferent comedy, wherein man moves untouched save for some occasional vaporous sentimentality. On the contrary, it has been promoted to a fatal and grandiose complicity in human affairs, of a piece with destiny, overpowering the minds of the actors, tyrannizing over their lives and fortunes, and appearing in any one locality as but the particular agency and manifestation of a single consistent, universal power.<sup>1</sup>

The other type of story theme is Hawthorne's. Here again, something in the setting dominates events and the people in them; but it is no longer blind Nature, it is the Moral Law—or, if you like, God—and on the other side, the Devil. Every reader of Hawthorne is perfectly familiar with this supernatural drama; but it will do no harm to quote from Frye's admirable interpretation of it:

The Puritans themselves, his ancestors, were dominated by a single idea . . . the idea of duty and guilt, of something owing God and of man's inability to redeem the debt by his own efforts. Under the influence of this idea their life had undergone a momentous transformation. . . . To all appearances it was with the inclemency of the

<sup>1</sup> *Reviews and Criticisms*, 107.

weather, the hostility of the elements, at most the enmity of the savages that they were contending. In reality this was all but a veil; it was the devil and his ministers, the forces of darkness and evil, the powers of hell that disputed with them for the salvation of their souls. And so to their excited imagination the conflict took on a solemn and grandiose significance. . . . Nothing was too small or remote to remain aloof or unaffected; there were signs in heaven and on earth, omens and portents and forewarnings, earthquake, meteor and eclipse, or dream and vision. . . . The world of spirits was divided in their quarrel, while reality itself was a mask, which might serve indifferently for the covert of a friend or the ambush of a foe.<sup>1</sup>

Is it not plain why stories spun around such a world-view heighten their atmospheric effect less disastrously than the more realistic variety of fiction does? It is because their dramatic factors are not in the people but in the setting itself, and hence the weaker, illusory crises in the thoughts and feelings of hero and heroine which the atmosphere tends to dampen are not a true part of the deeper complication. They are puppets, not through the writer's clumsy portrayal but because they really are nothing more than the creatures of some Hidden Showman. They are inactive through no sluggishness of the author's style but only because they are, by inmost nature, passive victims of cosmic circumstance. In short, the active force which, in ordinary dramatic narrative, wells up only in men and women now displays itself as a potency of the environment, *which therewith becomes, so far as the emotional effect upon readers is concerned, a character*. Be it blind Nature or be it a god, in either case this environment is endowed with a kind of personality having aims and human ways of doing. Its plans may be past understanding, but only by reason of secrets

<sup>1</sup> *Reviews and Criticisms*, 122 ff.

withheld from us and not because their logic and their emotional springs are alien to our minds.

We may finish the matter with a paradox: The atmosphere story is easiest in which the setting is not setting at all but the dominant character in a drama without setting. In Stevenson Nature is often the leading lady; in Poe, Conrad, Hardy and most other atmospherists, it is the villain; and in Hawthorne it is sometimes the hero's silhouette. But in all these realms of fancy, it is the great original man without a country. Nature has no environment, and God is without a dwelling place. Beyond them, there is neither time nor place.

4. *Atmosphere as an intensifier.* Though the genuine atmosphere story has narrow range and presents all but insuperable obstacles, the story with atmosphere is moderately easy to manipulate, plastic, and highly adaptable to all moods. By the story with atmosphere I mean, of course, a narrative wherein the tone of the setting is made to reinforce either the theme of a thematic development, or the dominant character of a character story, or the complication of a complication story. Almost every good author employs atmosphere thus, with some degree of skill and charm. And its employment is governed by a few rules which can be formulated with some accuracy, though not with as much as we might wish. In the main, they are merely special applications of principles we have already become familiar with.

a. *The intensifying effect is conveyed best by a characterization of the effect itself rather than by a description of the objects which, in assemblage, give rise to it.* At first reading, this may sound either meaningless or at least unprofitable. Of course the effect is most vivid when characterized, you may say; so the advice is idle. But such an observation misses the point, which is that *characterization of causes is by no means the same as characteri-*



zation of their effects. This is one of the most important facts in all artistic technique, be it the technique of story writing or of sculpture or of etching. It is no peculiar secret of art, but a general fact true of all causes and all effects. The physicist may describe to you ever so faithfully the nature of electricity and especially the differences of potential that go with differences of temperature. But all this will not give you a picture of the thunderclap which follows the flash of lightning. For here, and everywhere else, there is some unique quality in the effect which the cause does not possess and which therefore cannot be described in terms of the cause. Illustrations from fiction, however, will doubtless guide the learner more surely; so let us press into service that master of happy characterization, Daudet, and then contrast with him the least happy of all characterizers among writers of repute, namely Mary Wilkins Freeman.

In *The Lighthouse of the Sanguinaires* Daudet is depicting at the outset the coast of the island where the episode unrolls. In the midst of the picture comes this:

. . . When the mistral or the tramontana did not blow too hard, I would seat myself between two rocks at the water's edge, amid the gulls and blackbirds and swallows, and I would stay there almost all day in that sort of stupor and delicious prostration which are born of gazing at the sea. You know, do you not, that pleasant intoxication of the mind? You do not think; you do not dream. Your whole being escapes you, flies away—is scattered about. You are the gull that plunges into the sea, the spray that floats in the sunlight between two waves—the white smoke of yonder steamer rapidly disappearing. . . .

Here you have an extreme instance, in which the details of the scene are either ignored or baldly mentioned, and the whole quality of it made known through the mental effect the place makes upon the narrator. Powerful this device is, provided the reader is familiar with the hypnotic

drowsiness which the sea induces; but it fails sadly, if he has never experienced it. In the latter case there always remains a second method, namely that of describing the *material* effect of the setting upon persons or things in it. Thus, in *The Little Pies*:

It was a magnificent morning, one of those bright, sunny May mornings which fill the fruit-shops with clusters of cherries and bunches of lilac.

Or again, in *The Pope's Mule*:

He who never saw Avignon in the time of the Popes has seen nothing. . . . Ah! the happy days! the happy city! Halberds that did not wound, state prisons where they put wine to cool. No famines; no wars.

And, as a last sample, the fine handling in *The Elixir of Father Gaucher*:

Twenty years ago, the Prémontrés, or the White Fathers, as we Provençals call them, had fallen into utter destitution. If you could have seen their convent in those days, it would have made your heart ache.

The high wall, the Pacôme Tower, were falling to pieces. All around the grass-grown cloisters, the pillars were cracked, the stone saints crumbling in their recesses. Not a stained glass window whole, not a door that would close. In the courtyard, in the chapels, the wind from the Rhone blew as it blows in Camargue, extinguishing the candles, breaking the leaden sashes of the windows, spilling the water from the holy-water vessels. But saddest of all was the convent belfry, silent as an empty dove-cote; and the fathers, in default of money to buy a bell, were obliged to ring for matins with clappers of almond-wood.

These are all perfect, and because Daudet has clearly grasped and applied the profound truth that we judge things most acutely by their consequences. Notice especially the simple skill of the first quotation. Instead of drawing an elaborate picture of a May morning, Daudet

simply tells you the *effect* it had upon the fruit-shops. Here his technique is clear as day, whereas in the second citation it is not. The reader probably will have to stop and think that, when the author says: "Halberds that did not wound, state prisons where they put wine to cool," he is deftly naming the *results* of the peaceful rule of the Popes in Avignon. But, once you think about it, there can be no doubt that this is precisely what he is doing.

Contrast with these exquisite passages the opening description of the Munson house, in Mrs. Freeman's *A Symphony in Lavender*. Before criticizing it, we must recall that, in this story, the setting ought to integrate naturally with the dramatic action; for the sight of the house and its adornments indirectly leads the narrator into contact with the heroine and, as the title indicates, sets the tone of the story.

. . . The first object in Ware, outside of my immediate personal surroundings, which arrested my attention was the Munson house. When I looked out of my window the next morning it loomed up directly opposite, across the road, dark and moist from the rain of the night before. There were so many elm trees in front of the house I was in, that the little pools of rain water, still standing in the road here and there, did not glisten and shine at all, although the sun was bright and quite high. The house itself stood far enough back to allow of a good square yard in front, and was raised from the street-level the height of a face-wall. Three or four steps led up to the front walk. On each side of the steps, growing near the edge of the wall, was an enormous lilac-tree in full blossom. I could see them tossing their purple clusters between the elm branches; there was quite a wind blowing that morning. A hedge of lilacs, kept low by constant cropping, began at the blooming lilac-trees, and reached around the rest of the yard, at the top of the face-wall. The yard was gay with flowers, laid out in fantastic little beds, all bordered trimly with box. The house . . . had no beauty in itself, being boldly plain and glaring, like all

of its kind; but the green waving boughs of the elms and lilacs and the undulating shadows they cast toned it down and gave it an air of coolness and quiet and lovely reserve. I began to feel a sort of pleasant, idle curiosity concerning it . . . and after breakfast . . . I took occasion to ask my hostess . . . who lived there.

The student is urgently requested to study this passage minutely, comparing its turns with those of Daudet's. If he will do this, he will discover a most important structural difference between the techniques of the two authors. Daudet describes by noting the *effects* of the described thing upon something or somebody else. Mrs. Freeman describes directly and then notes the *cause* of the described thing. Thus, she tells us what made the Munson house look dark and moist, instead of telling us how the darkness and moisture of it affected her or something or somebody in the story. She explains why the pools of rain-water did not glisten, but she does not tell how they impressed her or what change or quality they wrought in the scene. She sees the lilac-trees tossing their blossoms; but Daudet would have told you what the motion made him think about and feel, or perhaps described the odd little shadows it caused to flit pendulously across the sward.

Now, it is just this difference which marks art off most sharply from science and other practical ways of thinking and doing. The scientist and sometimes the business man are concerned seriously with causes and reasons; for, knowing these, they are enabled to control the effects and thus to manage the world according to their liking. But the artist does not care to dominate finance or shape politics or explain the ultimate nature of carbon and bacteria; he aims only to depict various human affairs, especially the natural problems of life and human nature's way of coping with them. For his purposes, therefore, events and objects exhibit themselves with clearest contour in

their influence upon man and man's natural environment. *For it is this very influence, and it alone, which makes them factors in life's drama.* To narrate causes, while developing the setting of a story, is to forget the very nature and ideals of art itself; it is to become, for the nonce, practical or scientific or, perhaps, merely garrulous.

Much less offensive, of course, is flat, unexplaining description of details, such as one encounters all too frequently in the pages of most American local-color artists, whose technique is generally no less stiff than their parochial ideas. To call a spade a spade, a black horse a black horse, and so on, is a sin of omission only. It does not name causes, it merely fails to name effects. It is therefore a neutral method; at times serving admirably but generally so weak that it is more to be pitied than censured.

The reader is particularly warned against misconstruing the above. He must not think that I am there condemning the supposed virtue of simplicity. To rate low the description that does not characterize effects is by no means the same as to say that the parables of the Bible, for instance, are ill written because they do not characterize. It is true, their descriptive passages will be searched for in vain, while their occasional descriptive words are as bald as mountain granite. But this is precisely as it should be; for the parables, as we have said elsewhere, are not short stories at all, but fables like Æsop's (though less ingenious than the latter), and they are not fables *with atmosphere*. Nor could they have been such, without complete surrender of their purpose. Their aim was, of course, to bring home to some barbarians certain profound moral and religious themes. Now, the emotional quality of the latter is utterly alien to that of landscapes, town sights, architecture, furniture, weather, and all the other elements which figure in the setting of narrative

and whose effects constitute atmosphere. How futile it would have been, then, to have essayed intensifying the idea in, say, the parable of the prodigal son by descanting upon the calm and comfort of his old homestead or upon the filth of the courtyards where he devoured husks in the last days of folly! Doubtless such word-painting would have a power all its own—but this very excellence would have here become a vice, for it would have muffled the still, small voice of the sermon. One might as well try to accentuate the richness of human song with an accompaniment of thunder-claps and surf tumult. Wherever atmosphere distorts or obscures the single effect, description should be as flavorless and as unsuggestive as possible. It should vanish behind the story, even as it does in all great thematic narratives turning around ethical and religious ideas. But all such stories, be it repeated, are not stories with atmosphere, either by right or in fact. Hence what we have been saying about the handling of description does not apply to them.

b. *Atmosphere is integrated intensively by letting the action of characters in the story be directed toward or otherwise involve such elements of the setting as are intimately connected with the tone of the latter.* We saw, a moment ago, that one way of securing effective atmosphere is to characterize its effect. We have now to ask the more special question: which effect, if any, lends itself best to such characterizing? Broadly speaking, the answer runs thus: the best effect is the one to which the people of the story respond in a manner that affects the course of the story somehow. For such an effect is most closely woven into the texture of the plot itself.

Good literature abounds with instances of this, but there is none superior to *Markheim*. A great technician in every fictional problem, Stevenson was at his best in integrating atmosphere. Where can you find anything

more finely wrought than the events ensuing upon Markheim's murder of the dealer?

The thought was yet in his mind, when, first one and then another, with every variety of pace and voice—one deep as the bell from a cathedral turret, another ringing on its treble notes the prelude of a waltz—the clocks began to strike the hour of three in the afternoon.

The sudden outbreak of so many tongues in that dumb chamber staggered him. He began to bestir himself, going to and fro with the candle, beleaguered by moving shadows, and startled to the soul by chance reflections. In many rich mirrors, some of home design, some from Venice or Amsterdam, he saw his face repeated and repeated, as if it were an army of spies; his own eyes met and detected him; and the sound of his own steps, lightly as they fell, vexed the surrounding quiet. And still, as he continued to fill his pockets, his mind accused him with a sickening iteration, of the thousand faults of his design. . . .

Observe that Stevenson has chosen those very objects and sights and sounds which most naturally might play into just this dramatic situation. Clocks whose striking *impresses* the murderer as though they were alarums sounding his crime abroad and summoning the inhabitants of the earth to his pursuit. Mirrors which *fling* back into his face that very face itself, but so shadowed and shrunken in perspective and so fleeting that its innumerable manifestations *impress* him as an army of spies, and send him off into a cold panic. These disturbers of his fancied seclusion prey upon his mind, stir up fears that otherwise would have slumbered innocuously, and finally drive him into a turmoil of conscience and sophistry which precipitates the crucial situation. Here we find the ideal handling; the setting is much more than the place where things happen, it plays a part in the march of events, even as the dominant character does. It makes him think, it harasses him, it helps lead him to confession.

c. *Those elements of the setting figure most effectively in the action which enter into the latter most frequently, rather than most decisively.* This rule must be carefully construed. It is a generalization which story factors sometimes restrict and obscure. The theme, for instance, may include the thought that one little sight or sound turns a man from an evil course; and then, of course, this one little sight or sound must be played up tremendously at the dramatic instant. But usually stories do not demand such manipulation, for their settings only reinforce some emotional quality that runs through their entire actions. In all such cases, the writer's task is identical with that of the musical composer, who, starting with a certain simple combination of notes (his theme), endeavors to sustain, evenly yet without monotony, their unique melody and feeling values throughout the whole composition. Now, it is a matter of easy observation that a series of relatively slight impressions harmoniously related produces an intenser mood in us than the same impressions when condensed into one or two terrific instants of appreciation. Thus, a symphony one hour long brings to life more throbbingly its theme than the most exquisite two or three bars of music could. And, in a story, the most magnificent picture of the setting crowded, let us say, into the opening paragraph, will heighten the single effect much less potently than a hundred little significant glimpses of tree, sky, and brook scattered loosely up and down the whole narrative.

A host of young writers seem unaware of this elementary psychological fact. They cram all their landscapes into the opening event and leave the body of the story as bare of pictures as a ledger. The result is twice disastrous. In the first place, the setting has scarcely time, in the opening event, to integrate closely with the other factors of the story; so there it sits, like a dainty bonnet on the



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 5. RE: ALLEGED ATTEMPT TO OBTAIN PASSPORT  
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## EXERCISES

1. Analyze minutely the manner in which the settings of the following stories have been integrated so as to produce atmosphere. State precisely which of the above rules have been adhered to and which have not. Can you suggest better manipulation anywhere?

Haines, Donald Hamilton—*Who Only Stand and Wait*. (*Everybody's*, Oct., 1910.)

Stringer, Arthur—*The Man Who Made Good*. (*Everybody's*, Dec., 1910.)

Oppenheim, Jas.—*Slag*. (*Everybody's*, June, 1911.)

Hibbard, Geo.—*The Skyscraper*. (*Scribner's*, Jan., 1911.)

Dreiser, Theodore—*The Mighty Burke*. (*McClure's*, May, 1911.)

Post, Melville D.—*The House of the Dead Man*. (*Saturday Ev. Post*, Sept. 30, 1911.)

2. Take the characters and the complication of some one of the following stories, discover the single effect, and then alter the author's treatment of the setting so as to make it intensify that effect better than it now does.

Krog, Fritz—*Die Wanderlust*. (*McClure's*, Aug., 1911.)

Gerould, Katherine F.—*The Wine of Violence*. (*Scribner's*, July, 1911.)

Humphreys, Mary Gay—*For East is East, and West is West*. (*Scribner's*, Oct., 1911.)

Singmaster, Elsie—*The Rebellion of Wilhelmina*. (*Century*, Sept., 1911.)

3. Here is a list of settings. Designate with great care the emotional qualities of each one with which you are at all familiar; and, if any stories suggest themselves to you which those qualities intensify, sketch the plots.

Times Square, Manhattan, at seven o'clock Sunday morning.

An abandoned church in the Berkshire hills.

Noon hour in a knitting mill.

An old-fashioned New England parlor.

Threshing day on an Iowa farm.

A clear winter day in the Canadian woods.

The council chamber of some American city, during a session of aldermen.

A camp meeting in the back counties.

A sailors' supply store in an American seaport.

A village drug store.

Around a baseball bulletin before a newspaper office.

4. In each of the following adages is the germ of a hundred tales. Choose the one that appeals most strongly to you and write a thematic story around it, working as below prescribed:

What's worth doing at all is worth doing well.

A stitch in time saves nine.

Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.

Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.

God helps them that help themselves.

A small leak will sink a big ship.

It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright.

Having chosen your adage and the theme which your story is to exemplify, proceed as follows:

1. Write your theme (or story germ) in a few declarative sentences.

2. Pick out each phase of the idea and represent it by a person (or by many persons) acting. For instance, if your theme is: 'A weak, cowardly man is more terrible than a brave one in a desperate situation,' depict a weak man, a brave man, and a desperate situation in which the

coward does something more courageous or more foolhardy than the brave man would do. Then find an incident exhibiting the coward as a coward, and another revealing the courage of the brave man.

3. Write a brief narrative account of such situations, paying no attention to anything save clarity. If possible, keep the natural order of events.

4. Test the consistency and lifelikeness of the resulting rough story by thinking through all the episodes from the point of view of each character involved in them.

5. Eliminate scenes and character delineation that are not strictly necessary to convey the story. Whenever possible, make one episode develop two or three essential ideas.

6. Test the order of events. If they do not move with even or rising effectiveness, recast them so that they do. This may be done either by giving them a new order or else by intensifying.

7. Fix upon the dominant emotional tone of the story as a whole. With this clearly in mind, re-write from start to finish, echoing the tone whenever possible. Begin this not less than a week after the preceding task has been finished.

*Warning.* Do not suppose that this is the model way of writing stories. After you have found yourself, you may go at the work in any of a dozen other manners. But this exercise, though artificial and difficult, is valuable because it sharpens the fundamental issues of technique.

5. Pick out from the following abridged fairy tale the theme, the complication, the characters, and the action. Having done so, write a 1,000-word story outline preserving the idea and the typical line of action and the outcome of the original, but substituting human beings for the characters.

Next alter your version so that it will become a genuine short story, and then finish it as such.

There were once a mouse, a bird, and a sausage, who formed a partnership.

They had set up housekeeping, and had lived for a long time in great harmony together. The duty of the bird was to fly every day into the forests and bring home wood; the mouse had to draw water, to light the fire, and lay the table-cloth; and the sausage was cook.

It happened one day that the bird had met in his road another bird, to which he had boasted of their happiness and friendship at home.

The other bird replied scornfully, "What a poor little simpleton you are to work in the way you do, while the other two are enjoying themselves at home!" When the mouse has lighted the fire and drawn the water she can go and rest in her little room till she is called to lay the cloth. The sausage can sit by the stove while he watches that the dinner is well cooked, and when the dinner time arrives he devours four times as much as the others of broth or vegetables till he quite shines with salt and fat."

The bird, after listening to this, came home quite discontented, and, laying down his load, seated himself at the table and ate so much and filled his crop so full that he slept next morning without waking, and thought this was a happy life.

The next day the little bird objected to go and fetch wood, saying that he had been their servant long enough, and that he had been a fool to work for them in this way. He intended at once to make a change and seek his living in another way.

After this, although the mouse and the sausage were both in a rage, the bird was master, and would have his own way. So he proposed that they should draw lots, and the lots fell so that the sausage was to fetch the wood, the mouse to be cook, and the bird to draw the water. Now what was the consequence of all this? The sausage went out to get wood, the bird lighted the fire, and the mouse put on the saucepan and sat down to watch it till the sausage returned home with the wood for the next day. But he stayed away so long that the bird, who

wanted a breath of fresh air, went out to look for him. On his way he met a dog, who told him that, having met the sausage, he had devoured him.

The bird complained greatly against the dog for his conduct, and called him a cruel robber, but it did no good.

The little bird, full of sorrow, flew home carrying the wood with him and related to the mouse what he had seen. They were both very grieved, but quickly agreed that the best thing for them to do was to remain together.

From that time the bird undertook to prepare the table, and the mouse to roast something for supper, and to put the vegetables into the saucepan, as she had seen the sausage do; but before she had half finished her task, the fire burned her so terribly that she fell down and died.

When the little bird came home, there was no cook to be seen, and the fire was nearly out. The bird, in alarm, threw the wood here and there, cried out, and searched everywhere, but no cook could be found.

Meanwhile a spark from the fire fell on the wood and set it in a blaze, so that there was danger of the house being burned. The bird ran in haste to the well for water. Unfortunately, he let the pail fall into the well, and, being dragged after it, he sank into the water and was drowned.

6. Each of the following stories typifies its author's technique. To acquire intimacy with the latter, carry out the following program faithfully. On it the average student ought to spend *not less than 400 hours*.

1. Transcribe each story three times.

2. Reproduce it from memory three times, as best you can, never looking back to the original for aid. These trials should not be made on successive days, but at longer intervals.

3. Invent a new setting for the plot and write a story, adhering as closely as possible to the style of the original. Repeat this at least three times. For variety, choose a fresh setting at each practice.

4. Invent a plot considerably different from the original

and write your story in the model style. Repeat this at least five times. (Note. For ordinary class work this exercise must be greatly shortened. In this case it is advisable to concentrate on one author's style. By all means avoid a *little* experimenting with several authors. This is worthless and confusing.)

The stories to be experimented with are:

1. Poe—*The Cask of Amontillado*.
2. Maupassant—*The Necklace*.
3. Stevenson—*The Sire de Malétroit's Door*. (In *New Arabian Nights*.)
4. Wharton—*His Father's Son*. (In *Tales of Ghosts and Men*.)
5. O. Henry—*The Gift of the Magi*. (In *The Four Million*.)

7. The following is an underdeveloped story. Discover its theme (or other single effect). Then estimate which dramatic factor of the plot is weakest. Suggest improvements in it. Next criticize the angle of narration and, if possible, improve it. Finally rewrite the story in not less than 3,500 words.

Five hundred,—one thousand,—three thousand dollars for the head of Sarafan! He sank upon his doorstep, the paper slipping from his hand. Motionless, yearning, he looked to the west,—always to the west,—and over their beer they would say:—

"Old Hamlin, he waits for his boy."

In just such a twilight he had pleaded for her love,—and when the moon was high, she promised.

All the long May day they danced at their betrothal, and when the evening came, she had danced into the heart of Pierre, a rough but dashing soldier. The wise heads nodded:—

"He is handsome".

The young heads whispered:—

"She looks not unkindly on the stranger".

Hamlin said nothing.

One evening at parting, he held her hand longer than usual:—

"It is Pierre you love",—and she answered:—

"Yes".

That night young Hamlin, listless, stolid, laid upon the parson's table a few thumb-worn bills:—

"There will be no wedding".

In the morning, Pierre had gone and with him Hamlin's love.

The years that followed brought no word from Hamlin's love, neither did he make an effort to hear from her. Sometimes in the hushed voices as he passed, he could catch rumors of wretched poverty, of a brutal husband, and once it seemed to him that they spoke of her as a widow. Hamlin dreamed strange dreams.

She was coming back,—always coming back. Sometimes he trembled at her footstep. Sometimes his tired eyes drew her from the darkness. But always when the moon was high, he strained her to his aching heart.

Returning one evening, he found upon his doorstep a huddled mass of rags, half buried in snow, and beside it a whimpering child. Filled with apprehension, he turned the body. It was she.

He stared stupidly at the unconscious face. Suddenly he seized her wrist and felt her pulse. Frightened, he tore away her shawl and laid his ear above her heart. He rose reassured, and carried her into the house, the little one toddling at his heels.

Beside the hearth, he piled up for her a bed. He gathered the rough twigs and built her a fire.

For three miles he waded through the snow to bring back with him the village doctor. With the devotion of an ill-used cur, he watched beside her, and when the moon was high, she closed her sightless eyes.

Three days after there was the funeral, a trustee of the orphanage came to relieve him of the child. Hamlin kept the boy.

From this day, the tavern saw him no more. All day he toiled in the fields. His nights he spent at home, mending shoes.

When some father's heart would overflow with pride in his son, Hamlin said nothing. He looked at the



towsled head of his boy, and in his eyes there glowed a far-off vision.

As soon as the boy could understand, Hamlin would take out for him the silver hoard that grew so slowly. He would tell him of the wonderful schools in town, of the learning and honors that would be his. Every morning he drove him five miles to town that he might have a better schooling than the humble village could afford, and when, showered with honors, he entered the university, old Hamlin sat at home worn, triumphant, counting the last dollar that was needed to complete his dream.

As he passed through the village, he could catch again the hushed whispers. This time they were speaking of the boy and well they might speak. If only—Ah well, perhaps it was a fancy. Yet Hamlin felt that in his boy there was growing more and more powerful the lawless spirit of his father. Twice he had been caught in some wild escapade, and was spared only because of his brilliant scholarship.

Time and again he wrote for the money that Hamlin sent him with a trembling hand,—the money he needed for his studies—the money that found its way into some pit of hell.

For months at a time he would absent himself from his studies.

In his supposed senior year he came home one night to stay. Nervously Hamlin questioned him. No, he had met no one in the village.

Hamlin beseeched him to return. He argued, pleaded, threatened. He learned the whole crushing truth. They quarreled. The lad disappeared and with him the last of the silver hoard.

Hamlin laid his snowy head on the empty box.

"His father's blood,—only his father's blood".

Still looking to the west,—always to the west where his boy had gone,—Hamlin was startled from his dreaming. Some one was stumbling up the garden path. Someone fell upon him with a sob. 'His boy'.

Wild-eyed he pointed to the west.

"There,—there! They're coming for me"

"For you"?

"I am Sarafan".

Hamlin was motionless. "Who knows that Hamlin's son is Sarafan"?

"Only you".

His hands closed upon the lad's throat. He dragged him down into the cellar. They struggled fiercely. Hamlin was the stronger. He held him down until he breathed no more and then, smiling, he went out to meet the pursuers.

That night when the moon was high he dug the grave in a lonely thicket, and there he laid 'His Boy'.



**PART II:**

**THE BUSINESS OF THE SHORT STORY**



## THE BUSINESS OF THE SHORT STORY

Crown the heads of better men  
With lilies and with morning glories!  
I'm unworthy of a pen—  
These are Bread-and-Butter stories.  
Shall I tell you how I know?  
Strangers wrote and told me so.

He who only toils for fame  
I pronounce a silly Billy.  
I can't dine upon a name,  
Or look dressy in a lily.  
And—Oh shameful truth to utter!—  
I *won't* live on bread and butter.

Gouverneur Morris. Dedication of *It*.

The so-called practical advice purveyed to persons who wish to make money at fiction writing reduces pretty much to a few cynical propositions about Mammon, prejudiced editors, catering to the mob, and the ignominy of being an unknown writer. And when it does not, it swings to the other extreme, as in the case of O. Henry's recipe of success: "Write what pleases you. There is no second rule." Now, both these views are absurd. The affair is not so simple; neither is it so desperate nor so bright. It resembles every other business in that it depends upon many independent circumstances; over many of these the individual author has absolutely no control, and many others editors are powerless to direct. Reduced to its simplest terms, it is a 'problem of three bodies': (a) the reading public, (b) the author, and (c) the publisher. From this triad there is no escape, unless

the writer chooses to emulate the minstrels of old, wandering from house to house, reciting his wares, and gleaning dimes from the pleased and kicks from the wroth. The contemporary variation of this scheme is publishing at one's own expense; but this is generally less successful than out-and-out minstrelsy, for the volumes have to be given away to friends and creditors.

Probably, there are not over ten men in the world who analyze this 'problem of three bodies' with approximate completeness and accuracy; and these men are the shrewd veterans of the great publishing houses. It can be outlined here, though, with sufficient detail to assist the average story writer a little. I shall not explain the why and wherefore of all the following assertions. Some of them I do not understand, and others depend upon very complex, lengthy and difficult factors of social psychology, while still others are too obvious.

1. *There is not one reading public, but many.* This fact is one of the self-evident, but many a young writer (and many another) ignores it and pays dearly for the oversight. Yet the most casual inspection of magazines indicates it, and a ten-minute study of the U. S. Census demonstrates it. There are some ninety and odd million people within our borders. Of this multitude, nearly seven out of every ten live on farms or in small villages. Hundreds of thousands of these know only their fields and the hamlet church and the Saturday night gossip around the crossroads. Another hundred thousand or two are shrewd, prosperous Americans of the older type; they have been through high school, and perhaps through the State college; they read the President's Message and *The Country Gentleman*, they study the *World Almanac* winter evenings, and after bumper crops they send their families to Europe, while they stay home and loan money to river-bottom farmers at fifteen per cent. Then there

is the Progressive Villager, one of the most characteristic American types, who, from his elm-shadowed cottage, judges the world cannily with the assistance of the Circulating Library and the magazines. More than any other single class, he has shaped American culture; and, though his influence is swiftly waning, it still is a power in the land. Now, we might go on naming intellectual types, working from the back counties toward the East Side of Manhattan. And we should find hundreds of species, ranging from housewife to chorus girl, from old-school Methodist to Italian atheist, from neurasthenic bank clerk to professional safe-blower, from the new Puritan of Southern California to the anarchist who nightly bawls his creed in the beery basements of East Broadway. Some of these classes live three thousand miles apart, as far as Paris is removed from Timbuctoo; and the intellectual gulf between Paris and Timbuctoo is no greater than that which intervenes between such Americans.

That all these people are interested in very different affairs, is self-evident. That people read what they are interested in, is also axiomatic. Therefore, there are many reading publics. And this conclusion is richly confirmed by each month's output of literature and newspapers. There is one public for the *New York Call*, and another for the *New York Times*, and a third for the *New York Journal*. Mrs. Wharton counts her adherents by the thousand, and Robert W. Chambers reckons his by the ten thousand, while Laura Jean Libbey scores her multitudes in numbers of six figures. Outside of all these hordes many millions live serenely indifferent to metropolitan journals and the Best Sellers and the muck-rakers. What they peruse is pretty much of a mystery except to the sales departments of the large publishing houses; but that they do read, and that they have peculiar



and very decided tastes, is well known to the book trade. An interesting morsel of testimony on this matter is offered in a valuable anonymous book, entitled *A Publisher's Confession*.<sup>1</sup> The writer, who is the head of one of our most prominent publishing houses, says:

But stranger than the popularity of very popular novels, or than the utter failure of merely 'literary' novels, is the moderate success of a certain kind of commonplace stories. I know a woman of domestic tastes who every two years turns off a quiet story. She has now written a dozen or more. They are never advertised. . . . The 'literary' world pays no heed to her. Her books are not even reviewed in the best journals. They lack distinction. But every one is sure to sell from ten to fifteen thousand copies. No amount of advertising, no amount of noise could increase the number of readers to twenty-five thousand; and there is no way to prevent a sale of from ten to fifteen thousand copies. Why this is so is one of the most baffling problems of psychology.

I must confess that I find nothing baffling in the fixity of such a clientèle. There is a definite number of people who like red cravats with small black polka dots. There is a definite multitude which enjoys slow music in D minor best. There is a public that dotes on cantaloupe with pepper and salt, and another which revels in cantaloupe sugared. But what is there strange in this? Take any imaginable thing on earth, offer it to any human being, and he must either like it, dislike it, or be indifferent toward it. With only three possible ways of behaving, it is therefore a simple matter of arithmetic to show that, in a group of, say, forty million adults, there will be a pretty definite number liking any given object. And this number will remain nearly constant throughout the lifetime of the group, because adult tastes and appe-

<sup>1</sup>Doubleday, Page, 1905.

tites change very slowly. Thus, in each generation there will always be a vast number of different reading publics; and the writer who pleases one of them once can probably repeat the trick for a number of years.

2. *The novel may successfully appeal to a single reading public; the short story must appeal to many.* Please notice the wording of this statement carefully. It is not asserted that a novel should appeal to only one class, nor yet that a story which does this is devoid of genuine merit. The greatest novels certainly please scores of classes, while some unmarketable stories—for instance, the racier French sort—are excellent in every respect save the commercial. (I am, of course, speaking only of American commercial conditions.) What I do assert, though, is that the novelist *may* prosper, *may* carry his message or impart his fun to a very sharply defined group of readers; but this is almost impossible for a story writer except insofar as he has previously won his group of readers by writing novels. Why is this? The origin of the modern magazine explains it.

3. The magazine is supported chiefly by its advertising pages. The value of these pages depends upon the number of readers who are potential buyers of the advertised commodities. Hence the most successful magazine is the one which pleases some very large class, or, as is usually the case, many classes. Now, the short story writer who is not a novelist of repute is almost wholly dependent upon the magazine for his current sales. He cannot publish his tales in book form unless most of them have appeared in periodicals and won applause there. Twenty years ago and before, when the editing of a magazine was more an art and a profession than a business, things were quite different. An editor could then

print what he liked and trust in the existence of a few thousand like-minded readers who would buy. All his competitors were doing the same thing; and so they were not competitors at all, in the modern, sanguinary sense. Furthermore, all periodicals of those days were high-priced and catered to the upper classes; if not to the rich, at least to the cultured. And these readers did not scrimp in matters literary; they bought all magazines that interested them, just as people of the same stamp do today. How different with the business-ruled magazine of the twentieth century! Not content to reach the easy chair of him who of old pored over *Littell's Living Age* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, it fights its way to the table of the man who can afford only one magazine a month; to the office of the 'Tired Business Man' and the weary housewife's kitchen; to the seat of the commercial traveler on a dull journey. The result of this tremendous expansion of circulation may be read off by the most inexperienced observer. The popular magazine shuns every topic which deviates much from the tastes of the *supposed* majority of the class or classes to which it appeals. (I emphasize the participle, please note!) And this means that, as Mr. H. G. Wells recently phrased it, "the editor of the magazine that strives to please a million families has to deaden down the conception of what a short story might be to the imaginative limitation of the common reader."<sup>1</sup>

All material which can be appreciated only by one who has been to Europe, or has studied chemistry, or has perused the vital statistics of the Mississippi Valley, or

<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to his collection of short stories entitled *The Country of the Blind* (Nelson, 1912). The entire diatribe is well worth reading, in spite of some fanciful theories in it (from which Wells is temperamentally unable to abstain). It gives a fairly accurate picture of the plight of story writers in Great Britain today and voices a wholesome protest against the absurd formalism which sways many critics, readers and editors.

has been sentenced to the gallows, or has compared the texts of Macbeth, or has analyzed the tariff schedule, or has experienced any other thing which the average man has not,—all such material is forbidden to the writer of tales. Furthermore, all material which can be appreciated only by a person of exceptional mental powers, or with an extraordinary sense of humor, or with prodigious subtlety is even more strictly taboo. And the reason for the prohibition is always the same. It is not because the topics which exceptional people understand are intricate or audacious or radical or improper; it is simply because the largest reading public does not grasp them with the sympathy of insight.

4. Because of this, three types of short stories are unsuited to the average magazine: satire, allegory, and the 'fate drama'. They are but rarely accepted and then for some special reason which does not impair our general rule. Satire is either incomprehensible or weak to many intelligent people. Its appreciation demands an alertness of imagination considerably above the average. Occasionally a newspaper of the cultured classes, like *The New York Evening Post* or *The Boston Transcript*, cannot resist the temptation to wax ironical over some topic of the hour; and the result is ever the same; a sackful of protesting letters pours in from indignant subscribers who have taken the editorial words at face value. Now, it is just this element of irony in all spicy satire that militates against the latter. To make satire first-class, you must flavor it strongly with irony; but if you do, then you narrow your audience, admitting only those who are so familiar with the object of your attack that they can read it off through the ironic veil of double meanings.

As for the unpopularity of allegory, its difficulty is, at bottom, that of satire. Allegory, too, is saying one thing

and meaning another. And genuine intellectual skill is all too frequently required in the perceiving and enjoying of its twin significances. At best, allegory is not easy reading for the average man; and when it is fashioned in profound cogitation, it is little more than a riddle. I venture to say that not more than one magazine reader in four could understand *all* of the allegory in van Dyke's *Half-Told Tales*, which *Scribner's* had the courage to publish for its select *clientèle*. And this casts no reflection upon reader or author. The former may be very intelligent in his own way and well educated, too, and yet lack that peculiar nimbleness which allegory calls for. To lack it is no more disgraceful than to lack the power of following the texture of a Bach fugue. It is as much an endowment as the color of one's eyes.

As for the 'fate drama', the term itself requires definition. I refer to the opposite of the 'uplift story', after which so many editors are sighing. It is the story which depicts man as the victim of circumstance or—what is really the same thing—as the victim of some uncontrollable trait in himself. Maupassant's *The Piece of String*, perfect though it is as a fulfilment of its own artistic purpose, presents such a picture,—Maitre Hauchecorne killed by his own exceeding thrift, by his pride, and by the mere chance of being observed picking up something; hence the story would probably have been rejected by most American magazines, though not by all. And why? *Simply because it is not pleasant reading.* Most men and women are a little depressed by the thought that they are not the captains of their souls; and they do not wish to pay fifteen cents, still less thirty-five, for the depression. They get more than enough of it gratis, every day. They read fiction, especially magazine fiction,

either for pure pleasure or else for agreeable informal instruction.

Here is a fate drama which illustrates all the unpopular features of its species. A student's story, written with excellent style and technique, has to do with the effect which the religious services in a great cathedral exert upon a glass worker who is engaged in repairing some of the windows. The glass worker is a rabid atheist, bent upon converting everybody to his own views. The action begins with a scene in which he is mocking the religious mummerly which he has just been witnessing, and proving that those who respect this are fools. Soon after, his little boy is injured by an automobile. A clergyman comes to console him and the glazier turns him away with wrath. The boy dies and "at the funeral, out of the darkness and bitterness of his heart, Joe spoke his hopelessness to the little group of mourners gathered in his parlor." Back to his work in the cathedral he goes, still reviling the chanting priests far below his scaffold and sneering at the superstitious old women who go through the motions of worship.

As the days passed, working at his solitary task, he began to get a certain companionship from the regular recurrence of the services. The solemn peal of the organ and the measured cadence of the incantations, even the hushed restlessness of the changing congregations, combined to soothe his wounded spirit which was sore oppressed in those days while little Bub's death was so new. Once he caught himself envying those hundreds of people whose faith could pass beyond the barriers of the grave. For that he took himself to task. Too well he knew they were hypocrites.

But as the days went by he shook off less easily the awesome effects of the services. The music began to exert its hypnotic influence. More and more, a sense of the great reality on whom he might call pressed upon him.

"Play ball"! he impatiently exclaimed aloud, "you're measuring that vault. That's what you are doing".

For a moment he had thought himself part of that worshipful assemblage, standing with bowed head above. By a strong effort of will he tried to bend his mind to the minutiae of his task, but like a mighty flood the irresistible influence of the place surged upon him. His spirit was awed with a sense of invisible power and sublimity. He felt the actual presence of the spirit of the Almighty. The sound of the chanting ceased, and the priest's voice was raised in supplication. Moved by an irresistible impulse, Joe Barry sank to his knees, his lips moving in prayer.

Some editors would reject this story simply because it deals with a religious theme, which is now-a-days considered not only bad taste but also bad policy. The more serious objection to it, however, is not the theme but the moral, which is that the religious influence is hypnotism by sights and sounds and ancient mummeries, and that they are strong enough to vanquish a man's deepest convictions. The reader does not have to be an unbeliever in order to feel the depressing effects of this moral. Whether Joe Barry's philosophy was true or false, certainly it was sincere; and what is more discouraging than to see a genuine persuasion defeated by mere music and incense and fancies?

5. This last fact is one on which we must dwell at once, so persistently is it ignored or underestimated or—worse yet—misconstrued. Authors who have not yet caught their bearings are wont to berate now the editor and now the public for a singular perverse unwillingness to take 'serious stories'. By a 'serious story' they mean the 'fate drama', which, by the way, is much loved and attempted by beginners. They declare, in their invective, that the editor and his public 'don't know real art when they see it'. Unfortunately, some excellent literary critics

and other authorities encourage this belief by sneering at the low grade of current short fiction. Now, such a verdict carries well in a class room of sophomores; also, it is a balm to the proprietors of rejected MSS. But it is founded upon a fatal misconception and upon false standards. It is not merely perfectionism; it is bad arithmetic. The perfectionism consists in restricting the name of art to half a dozen masterpieces and condemning as 'mere journalism' everything inferior to *They* and *A Coward* and *Markheim*. Not long ago I heard a professor of English Literature pour scorn upon a distant colleague who lectured to undergraduates on Mrs. Wharton, O. Henry, and Jack London. There are, said the scorner, only six story writers in the world worthy of academic attention. Now, here we see perfectionism in its most preposterous hypertrophy. The average perfectionist is a shade more liberal; and yet his error is great. In demanding that the monthly magazine accept only what measures up to the very best, he not only sets an impossible standard, but also misunderstands the function of magazines. This function is not the publishing of masterpieces; it is the disseminating of instructive, critical, and entertaining articles and fiction. People want such, and they want them much more than they want masterpieces. They want life and the affairs of life exhibited to them in many phases and moods and bearings; and these infinitely exceed art in their variety and quality of form and content.

Art, in the perfectionist's meaning of the word, is only one of life's many pleasures and tonics. It is less important than food, less true than school-books, less influential than the weather, less progressive than chemistry, less moral than common sense, less human than politics, and less refreshing than a dip in the surf. And it always will be, so long as people remain sane. Hence the artist



may not arrogate to himself the right of telling people what they should read. People will read what they like to read; and, if healthy, they will be literary pluralists,—to borrow the speech of philosophy for a moment. One day Smith will hunger for Mark Twain, while Jones craves Bunyan. The next morning Smith digs into the history of Standard Oil, and Jones samples Landor with gusto. And thus appetite shifts to the year's end. Now you may call it fickleness or shallowness, if you choose; and you may extol the truly artistic reader who would be content to be cast away upon a desert island with nothing but *Paradise Lost* and Shakespeare. But the truth remains that real life, in all its vigor and contempt of rigid form, is a perpetual hunt after new things. Little does it care what it finds, if only the find be novel, agreeable, or instructive. It tastes, sucks the sweet, takes on strength from the day's kill, and moves on after quarries fresh and flavors strange. Perhaps this habit is but the subtlest form of the instinct of self-preservation; it may be the effort to get one's bearings toward all things and thus to learn how to cope with the latter. Be that as it may; the fact itself looms mountain-like, in the realm of books and papers no less than everywhere else. And, whether he likes it or not, the story writer must reckon with a public that is forever demanding new manners and many of them, new tales and strange ways of telling them. It is a public which agrees wholeheartedly with Bacon that "there is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion"; and it exceeds Bacon in its belief that strangeness, whether of form or of content, is the better half of art.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These remarks seem to contradict the one made a moment ago, that people's tastes are fixed. But there is no conflict here. An adult's likes and dislikes are fixed pretty definitely *with reference to each type of object artistic or otherwise*. But this does not mean that

Here, then, is the editor's impregnable defense against those authors who curse him for shipping back to them their stories which are as swift as Maupassant's, as analytical as James', and as pyrotechnic as Poe's, and yet unacceptable. It is his defense against the critics who damn him for printing mere anecdotes, plotless character sketches, smartly shallow dialogues, clownish humor, and news items disguised as fiction. He may always say: "Indict me, but first indict life itself." And to that there is no answer.

6. Another aspect of the 'serious story' must be considered. People say that current fiction is shallow and empty of ideas; and so it falls short of being fine art, for fine art always gives us something to think about. Now, as a bald statement of contemporary fact, this is more true than false; but, as a criticism of the magazine short story, it is unsound. For, in the field of magazine literature, there are many specialized forms, each striving to convey a distinct type of information or effect; and *the short story, which is one of these forms, specializes in entertaining, not in conveying ideas.* Hence, it is only incidentally that a story with an idea is printed. This happens, not because authors cannot produce such fiction, but only because editors elect to separate fact from fiction more sharply than ever.<sup>1</sup> And the editors do this

the man unswervingly pursues some one thing which he happens to enjoy. It does not mean that his attention is directed forever to it and to nothing else. He may love his red cravat with black polka dots, but this does not prevent him from worshipping Maeterlinck. In other words, every person has a large number of tastes, each of which is directed toward its own peculiar material; and, while each taste may be changeless, the person may shift frequently from one to another. This is just what happens in everyday life, and most conspicuously in reading.

<sup>1</sup> One apparent exception to this rule appears in the editorial policy of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which publishes many news

because the whole world is doing it. It is one minor feature of that specialization which is characteristic of twentieth century life. It is also a symptom of advancing intelligence. The artist faces the very same predicament which the physician, the manufacturer, the attorney, and the scientist confront. Like them, he can achieve most by attempting least; by concentrating upon some one theme, upon some single dramatic pattern, upon some set of characters, he can acquire a familiarity with their possible effects and an ease in producing these which will enable him to write more stories and better stories. This is the policy of most contemporary story writers. It is, however, the least profound aspect of literary specialization. The more momentous one we discern in the conspicuous tendency of these same writers to leave preaching to preachers, fine metaphor to the poets, statistics to the sociologist, and generally all matter-of-fact argument and all serious philosophizing to essayists. We observe it in their effort to entertain, to be dramatic, to romance freely. Nine out of every ten stories today have no message, for they are not messengers; they are entertainers. If you wish a message, go to the specialists in messages; go to the writers of serious articles.

Were we indulging ourselves in a critique of the age, we might linger long over the question whether this extreme division of literary labor makes for the good in the long run. And we should come to the conclusion that, while it greatly improves middle-grade fiction, it stifles the highest. The reasons for this view cannot be here presented, inasmuch as we are concerned with the commercial problem only. It will perhaps suffice to hint that the fundamental hindrance which com-

articles and essays on social problems in the form of stories. But in its genuine fiction this periodical follows the modern custom quite strictly, serving up only entertainment pure and simple.

mercialized story writing raises is the rapidity of work and bulk of material required. Stories with messages, stories with big ideas cannot be ground out by recipe, nor yet in bulk. No amount of technical skill calls them into being; though of course when the idea comes, such proficiency enormously hastens its consummation. The big idea comes in its own season; to some persons often, to others but once in a lifetime, and to most of us never. Upon its arrival no man can reckon, and he who hopes to earn his bread by it hopes foolishly. The wish is contrary to human nature, and the career of almost every literary genius bears pathetic witness to the fact. Hawthorne, in his entire life, had possibly ten big ideas for stories. Poe had about the same number. Stevenson had not more than four (some critics might say only two). And most excellent authors of today have not come upon as many. All of which goes to prove that, in the *business* of story writing, the big idea is not worth figuring over. If it comes, it comes; and if it doesn't, it doesn't. As in every other commercial enterprise, so here; *the worker gains most by raising the average quality and the gross quantity of his output.* ✓

This brings us to an observation which must have impressed everybody who has compared the magazines of today with those of twenty-five years ago. Specialization and increased commercialization have not appreciably increased the number of top-notch stories, but they have enormously increased the multitude of good, well constructed, entertaining, psychologically true stories. ✓ Let the student consult the files of French, English, and American magazines of 1880 and earlier, and contrast them with current periodicals of the same type. He will discover story after story in the former which even *Lippincott's* and *Ainslee's* would now reject with loathing. The improvement is astounding.

7. On the side of technique, specialization is not new; certainly Poe and Maupassant concentrated narrowly and developed to the utmost the possibilities of a few story types. But on the side of story-telling, the intenser way of doing things in a product of recent years. It dates from the rise of the fifteen-cent magazines. An entertaining article might be written on the business devices now employed by professional short story writers; the card catalogue, the 'follow-up system' whereby one story which has pleased a public is announced as the first of a series; the news clipping bureau, through which the specialist in high society stories receives raw material and the specialist in detective tales receives his matter, finished except in its dramatic form; and so on. But it is not important to instruct the learner in all these tricks of the trade. It is enough to disabuse him of the notion that he may achieve success by sitting at his midnight desk and thinking and writing as the spirit moves. True, some admirable fancies are thus coaxed into existence; but we are concerned here, not with the occasional happy idea but with the steady output, which alone makes story writing a profession and profitable. Nine stories out of every ten are suggested, in one manner or in another, by real episodes; and the variety of real episodes in any field or of any flavor is immeasurably richer than the range of any one man's fancy. These two indisputable facts set the first rule of specialization, which is this: *Get in touch with some phase of life; become intimate with something that is going on in the world.* They also shape the second rule, which is this: *Study one and only one emotional quality of your chosen phase of life, for a long time.* Master its dramatic texture. If, for example, you wish to find stories in the high cost of living, look only to the comic aspect of it, or only to the grim tragedy of it, or only to the high adventure of it.

The facts have all these sides and as many more as an apple. Their artistic quality shines forth only insofar as each feature is isolated and exhibited by itself. And the writer can isolate them most artistically who has long studied them in isolation.

How one shall go to work in detail depends upon the topic selected and upon the emotional tone. It depends too upon the mental habits of the individual writer; where one might systematize to a nicety, another might blunder along with the sure blindness of instinct. It is therefore idle to recommend the scrap-book, the card index, the press bureau, and the slumming expedition to all prospective writers. We may, however, insist upon the broad principle that *each learner should aim to order his work so as to produce the largest possible number of fairly good stories about his special subject.* For it is by much writing that the power of good writing grows most swiftly. The most pernicious habit is the imitation of Flaubert; the day-long search for the perfect word, the month-long wait for an ingenious turn of the plot. In the long run, the greater gain comes to the man who masters, not the minutiae of expression, but the nature of things written about; and to the man who is not afraid to produce a score of mediocre works, while on the way to finer achievement. The advance is greater, both commercially and artistically. The lower grade of fiction produced in the course of practice generally finds a market, albeit a cheap one; and thus, as we have elsewhere said, the learner's education pays for itself. On the other hand, heavy production of carefully worked out second and third rate stories indubitably hastens the writer toward the high goal of every artist; namely *toward that degree of proficiency at which technical manipulations become habits.* The first moment of genuine artistry arrives when the writer begins to use, without

thinking of them, all the cautions and principles which we have been discussing in this book.<sup>1</sup> Now, nothing lifts one so speedily to this pitch of skill as sheer quantity of drill—intelligent drill, of course, and not mere dull repetition of rules. The facility with which newspaper reporters turn to fiction writing is due in no slight measure to the steadiness and magnitude of their narrative practice. The number of fictional performances which some of them turn out annually proves that they have learned to compose and narrate plots in much the same way that a person frames ordinary conversational sentences. And this is as it should be.

8. In connection with incessant exercise, there is one task which surprisingly few beginners discharge, and that is *imaginative experimenting*. There is a superstition abroad that first thoughts are best, and that therefore one should dash off a story idea just as it flashes upon one. And, as a corollary, the only way to get good ideas is to sit back and wait for them to bob up. This is a very easy and pleasant fashion, but alas! highly unprofitable; and it soon brings its victim to a state of comatose laziness out of which nothing short of starvation will goad him. It is, in unfamiliar guise, the classic sin of waiting for something to turn up.

I have watched several hundred writers (of all degrees of skill); and, with very few exceptions, the successful experiment no less thoroughly than the chemist does, while the most dismal failures are nearly all incurable first-thought writers.

<sup>1</sup> A few fortunates early acquire this ease without orderly help. To them technical instruction seems futile. They say they cannot think of the thousand and one precepts, nor do they have to. This is true. Technique is only a means to establishing habits of behavior. Once the latter are in full swing, thought of the mechanism drops out.

Now, what is imaginative experimenting? Well, it consists in the deliberate manufacture of many combinations of characters and situations, in various orders and with various dramatic movements. Of the many resulting plots, usually the two or three best will alone prove worthy of writing; the rest go into the waste basket. Roughly speaking, there are two types of combination. First, you may invent a situation and then, keeping it unaltered, put different people into it and compare their behavior. Or, secondly, you may begin with a definite person—or with a character trait—and you may try it out in many situations, seeking that one which brings out most vividly the chosen quality of human nature. (Stevenson, it will be recalled, suggests in a different connection a third method, that of choosing an environment and fitting into it persons and events which harmonize with its own peculiar emotional tone. But, for reasons elsewhere discussed, this type of story is so rare and difficult that we may here ignore the experimenting it calls for.)

Not until you have gone through these operations several times, will you realize how prodigious is the host of widely differing stories which lurks potentially in a single character or in one situation. And after you have experimented much, you will perhaps turn the method to profit, by finding a character and a small field of situations which yield a dozen, or even a score of stories. This is the richest of all finds. For each story in such a series helps to sell the next, and—what is still more valuable—the collection will be accepted more eagerly for publication in book form than a miscellany will. Almost every prominent professional writer of brief fiction today is producing such series; there is scarcely a magazine that is not always seeking them; and there are few fiction publishers who are not making favorable

✓



offers for the book rights. Thus the stories sell twice, bringing double profit; they associate the author's name with a familiar character or theme and thereby add to his reputation; and, through the imaginative experimenting they force him to, they ripen his technical skill wonderfully.

We must not shut our eyes, though, to the dangers of such specialization and its imaginative experimenting. They always tempt the writer to become mechanical, to overwork certain technical tricks which he happens to hit off peculiarly well, and soon to reduce his once live characters to puppets. The more successful he is with a series, the stronger this temptation grows, for publishers then urge him to grind out 'more of the same stuff' and pay him in advance for stories yet unconceived. Now, to write conscientiously *and* with full vigor, after one has spent all the money the story brings, requires rare moral fibre, which literary folk do not possess more commonly than ordinary mortals. Were it not needless cruelty, we might name a dozen authors who, writing under contract with advance payments, have given their editors stuff beneath contempt. And, in a few instances, they have, except in the narrowest legal sense, swindled the magazine.

Theoretically, two preventives suggest themselves: the abolition of the contract system, or at least of advance payments determined prior to inspection of MSS.; or, if not this, then a stricter conscience in authors. But both schemes, I fear, will long remain in the realm of pure ideas. So long as publishers compete among themselves, each will do his best to outbid all rivals in the quest of stories; and so long as authors compete, for bread-and-butter's sake, they are going to accept the highest bid.

9. There remains one practical question: what are the

story writer's prospects? The answer is hard; for, when all is said and done, the chief factors of success and failure are the individual and his opportunity, both of which defy rules and calculation. There are fashions in fiction, as everybody knows; and they are sometimes as capricious as the fashions in women's rigging. The last decade has seen the story of the stupid life (miscalled realistic fiction) give way to half a dozen more thrilling types, such as the high-life story, the muck-raking story, the whimsical story of every-day life, and even the story of high adventure (which Stevenson revived with such exquisite, even too exquisite, touch and which today Jeffry Farnol and others are shabbily counterfeiting). Now, over these fluctuations of manner and stuff, only the exceptionally powerful and prolific author exercises appreciable influence. Public taste, a very vague thing but as real as it is vague, controls them; and it is controlled by a host of shifting circumstances, by new discoveries, by the deeds and preachings of dominant personalities, by political affairs, by social unrest, and everything else that goes to make up life in its full reality.

In estimating the chances of an author with average endowments, we must therefore reckon with the probability of his being more or less out of key with the favorite mood of the hour. There is ever the danger that, in a generation which revels in slaughter and red glory and desperate hazards, he may be sighing to write of simple country folk or tea-table comedies. And yet this perilous coincidence is not fatal. For, as we have seen, there is not one reading public, but many; and the demand for nearly all types of stories is approximately constant. The change of fashions affects only the relative cash value of them. What the hour approves is worth from two cents a word upward (there being no maximum). The untimely story, however beautiful, brings newspaper

rates or even less (except when the value of the author's name is added to it, or when the author turns it in on a contract).

Now, even the best writer cannot produce steadily fine specimens of the more profitable style; and the fairly skilful one may count himself fortunate if he can hit it off once in four tries. Hence there are only two roads to money-making: the author may make his few fine stories so very fine that they earn him a reputation which will be added in dollars and cents to his less admired output; or, on the other hand, he may invent an enormous number of stories, write them without much attention to finish, and make 'quick sales and small profits'. Most professional writers choose the second course in the beginning of their careers, and by sheer bulk of production acquire a facile technique, a sense of story values and of public taste, and a variety of information about life which, sooner or later, enable them to enter upon the other, pleasanter path. This may not be the course of genius, but it is that of the craftsman; and it is to the craftsman that this book is directed.

In the light of all this, we may estimate the writer's chances of success as follows:

*The earning power of an author depends upon three factors: (1) his sympathy with contemporary tastes and thought; (2) the quantity of his monthly output; and (3) the ease of his technique. A marked decrease in any one of these must be offset by an increase in one or both of the others, if success is to be assured.*

Figures are dangerous here; but I venture to say that the person who, *after a thorough study of technique*, cannot write every month at least two stories of average magazine length (4,500 words, say) should not aspire to become a professional. I do not say that he must be able to sell two stories a month, nor that all that he writes at this

speed shall wholly please him. The measure is adjusted only to his narrative composition. If he can hold the pace, he probably has his technique well enough in hand to justify further efforts; and also his imagination is likely to be moderately vigorous. If he cannot hold it, he still may join the great majority, who write occasionally. This course may turn out to be quite advantageous. If a school teacher, let us say, can sell only five good stories a year, that adds from five hundred dollars to a thousand or more to the annual income.

10. The writer who has difficulty in placing his stories finds two parties eager to accelerate his rise into publicity. There is the pay-as-you-enter publishing house, and there is the literary agent. The former agrees to put the author's collection of stories on the market, if the author will kindly pay all the costs and a handsome profit to the publisher. Usually the contract he is asked to sign is so worded that the author does not foresee the sums he will owe. Also, he will not discover until too late that printing a book is not the same as publishing it. The former process can be done by anybody having access to type and presses; the latter is possible only to those who have access to the public. To reach readers is not at all simple; indeed, it is intricate, expensive, and largely a matter of having a long-lived reputation back of the firm name. The decline of the small bookstore has made it all the harder, and so too has the huge expansion of book-advertising campaigns. Now, with possibly one exception, all those publishers—so-called—who offer to print at the author's expense lack some one or more of the requisites of genuine publicity; and the vast majority of them are mere job printers preying upon ignorant writers.

As a rule all publishing houses worthy of the name refuse to produce fiction at the author's expense. They can better employ their staff in finding and publishing works

which warrant their assuming the natural business risks of investment in them. This practice not only contributes to their reputation and profits, in the long run, but it also serves society well. For a book which is worth publishing at all is worth its cost to the publisher and the venture of it. And there are so many good publishers and so many acute judges of all orders of literary merit assisting them that the chance of a meritorious volume being rejected by all of them is probably less than one in a thousand. The beginner may safely conclude that something serious is the matter with his collection of stories (or whatever else he may offer), if it has gone the rounds of the large publishing houses in vain. At the very least, the MS. is untimely.

11. The story writer, however, is not interested so deeply as is the novelist in pay-as-you-enter publishing schemes; for his natural avenue to fame is the magazine. He accordingly gives more thought to the advertisements of the literary agent, who claims to market his wares more expeditiously and more profitably than he can. A little experience, though, shows that the agent's services are usually confined to (1) collecting the author's rejection slips, thereby sparing him much agony; and (2) typewriting his MSS. and doing it over and over, as fast as the poor things become frayed and thumb-branded under much editorial handling. In fairness, be it added that some agents do more than this, in that they sell great quantities of inferior material to fourth-rate periodicals, to the newspaper syndicates, and to picayune sheets in the back-country, the very names of which are known only to the compilers of the Publisher's Directory. The prices secured in these markets sometimes cover the cost of paper, postage, and typewriting. Nevertheless, the beginner may be thankful for this much, which is more than the learner in painting, sculpture,

and music can earn. In all seriousness, I believe that the literary agent who renders such service is a benefactor of youth. Only let youth understand that the MSS. so disposed of are school exercises, nothing more. They are not potential ornaments of *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Everybody's Magazine* or *Collier's Weekly*.

In gaining entry to periodicals of quality, the literary agent can accomplish nothing that the writer cannot do for himself with persistence. The editor will buy from the agent only what suits the purposes of the magazine; and he would buy it, whether it came to him through the mail or through the window. Furthermore, he is quite competent to discover good stuff in the midst of the stream of trash which pours in upon him daily from the Post Office. The better the magazine, the more thorough its system of reading contributions and appraising them. Several magazines hold conferences over MSS. about which some of the office readers are doubtful; and not a few stories are inspected half a dozen times before acceptance or rejection. What cause, then, has the author to complain of inattention and to invoke the literary agent to plead his case? Nothing save his own unbusiness-like habits drives him to that course. If he allows a rejection slip to discourage him; if, having received one or two, he sends the MS. no further; and if he sends it on and on without having observed the preferences of each recipient periodical, then he ought to fall back upon the literary agent. For the agent is at least a shrewd drummer.

12. In closing, I shall list a few elementary rules and warnings which the beginner must respect quite religiously.

1. Typewrite all MSS. (on one side of the paper). Handwriting is little short of an insult to the editor.

2. At the top of the first page print your name and address.

3. Enclose stamps for return of MS.

4. Forward MSS. to the magazine, not to some individual on the editorial staff (unless you have unusual reasons and warrant).

5. Study the various periodicals; learn what they prefer and what they discard. Before sending out a story, ask yourself whether it is suited in theme and in treatment to the magazine it is addressed to.

6. Never retire a MS. to the waste basket until you have sent it in vain to *every* publication which might be expected to consider it. Fifteen editors may reject, and the sixteenth accept it.

7. Keep a memorandum of all comments passed upon each story by editors. This will help you to grasp the editorial policy of many a periodical, in time.

8. Do not work too long consecutively upon a story that refuses to come out right. Put it aside for a few weeks or months, then return to it fresh. This rule holds good for all kinds of intensive intellectual work. Many a man handicaps himself heavily by making a virtue of sticking at a task until it is finished. Modern psychology has proved that this is the wrong way to work, and modern business experts have confirmed the proof in practice.

9. Form some habit of regular work. What it shall be you alone can decide; only let it be strenuous. Probably four hours of writing every day is the least you should content yourself with during the years in which you are mastering technique.

10. Shun classic literature as a source of story ideas. Study it only for the pleasure of it and for information about technique and rhetoric.

11. Read current magazines carefully, even those which you dislike. Watch the work of the more successful writers. Compare their themes with those which

are being discussed by essayists, journalists, politicians, social workers, and other men of the world. Observe to what extent fiction draws upon science, reform, and practical affairs for its underlying thoughts. ✓

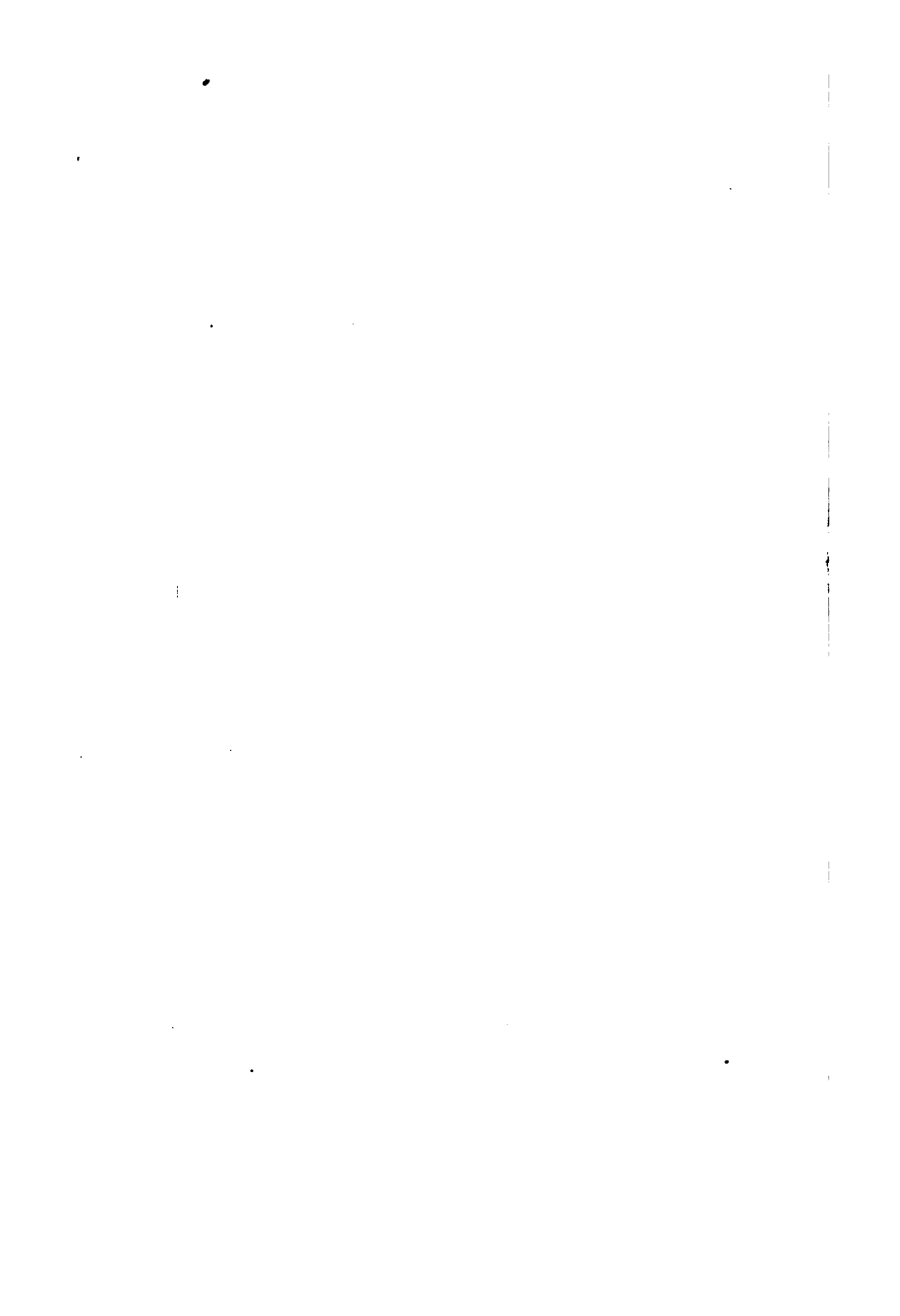
12. If you have the slightest difficulty in expressing yourself, study the dictionary and a good thesaurus persistently.

13. Practise self-criticism. Try to read your own MSS. coldly and with detachment. But, better still, find a friend or some professional critic who will pass honest, frank judgment upon them. The value of such criticism, even though it be inexperienced, can scarcely be over-estimated, provided you take praise and blame in the right spirit.

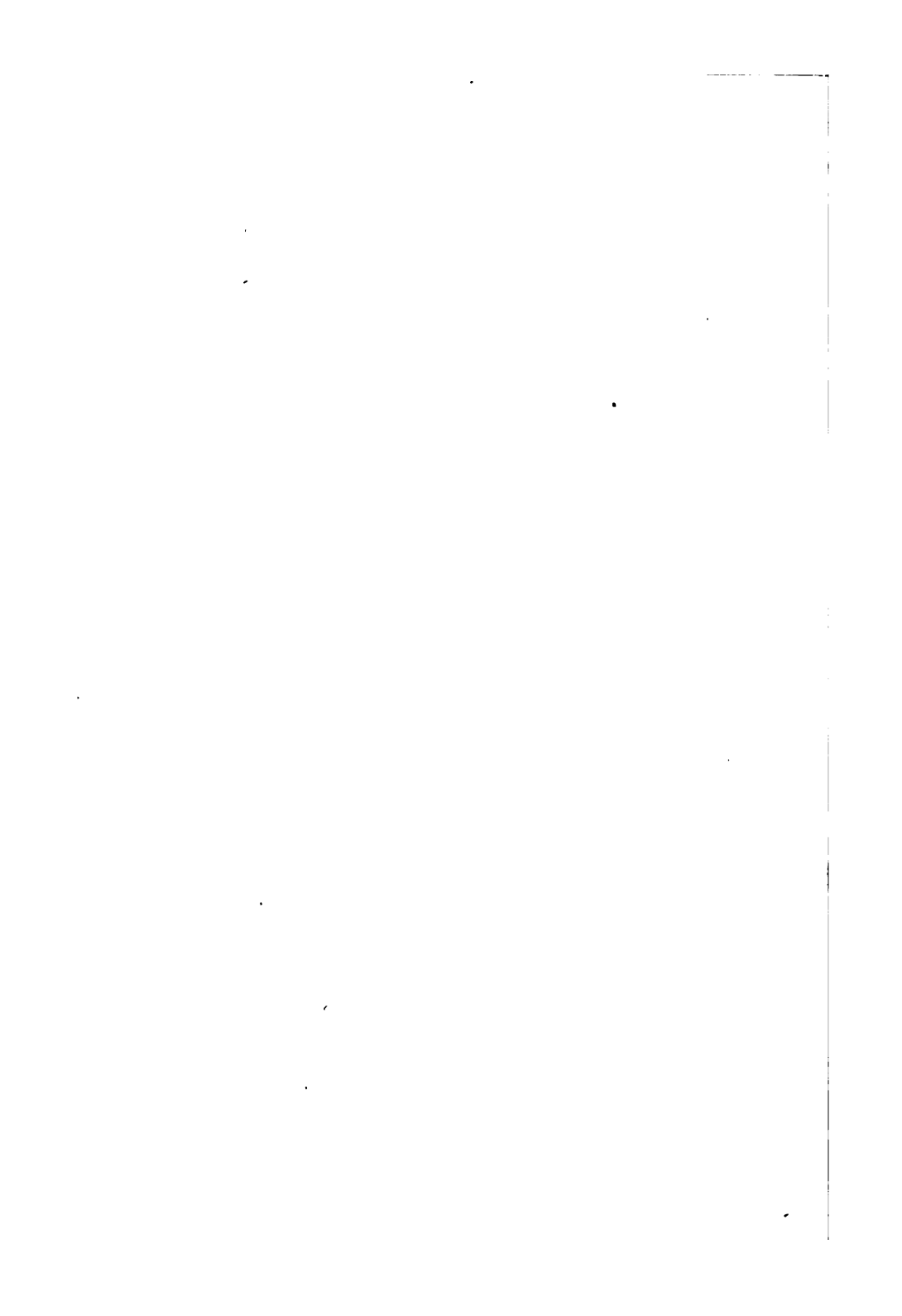
14. Keep some record of every story idea that pops into your head, no matter how silly or highflown or clumsy it may be in its original form. Infinite are the possibilities of combining, weaving, and twisting thoughts; and what the result will be no man can foretell. Some great stories have had trivial, even ludicrous origins. ✓

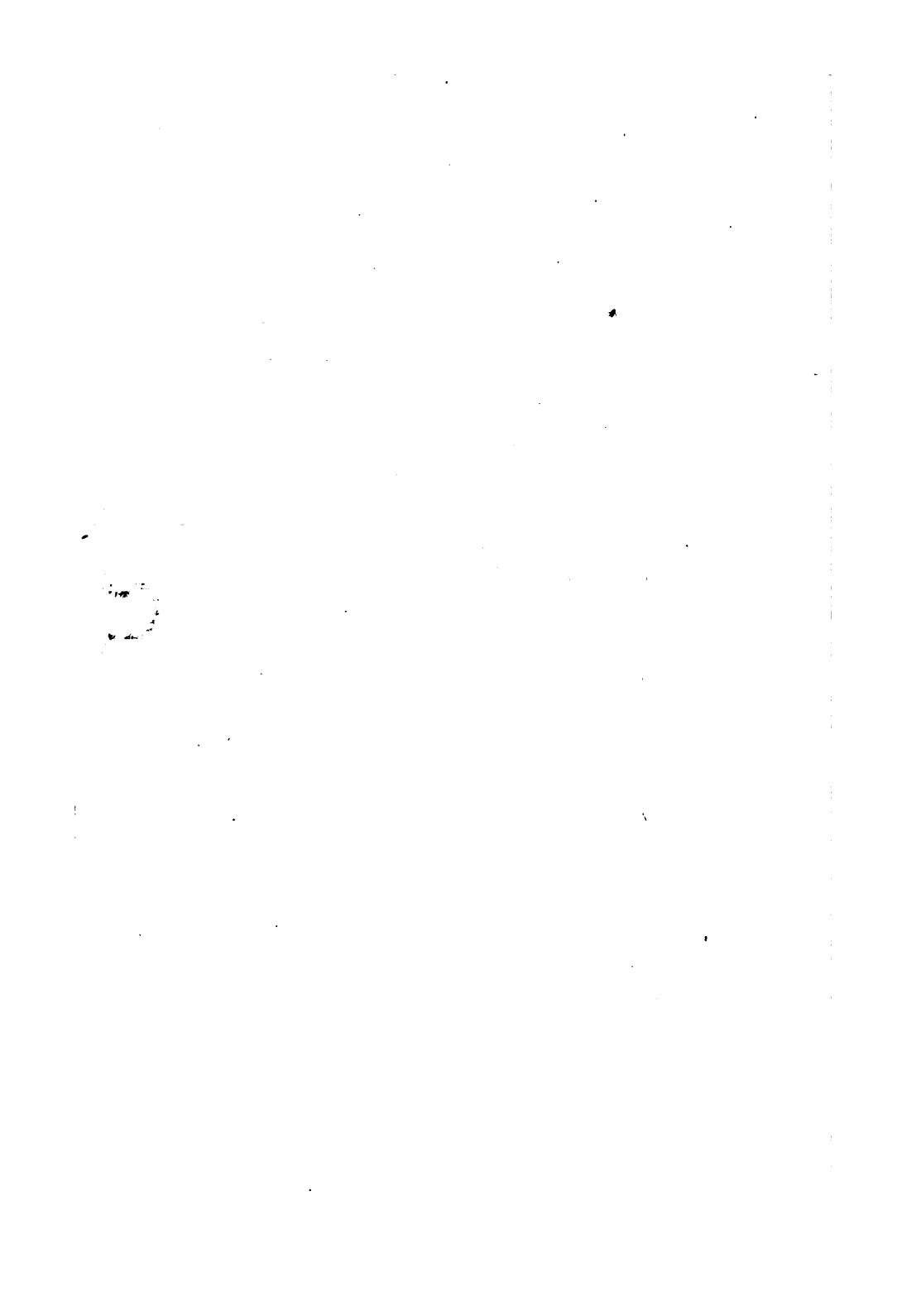
15. Expect to spend at least two hard years on technique before acquiring noticeable facility of story construction. Not one writer in fifty spends less than that period, though many deceive themselves into believing otherwise. To some the warning should be given that their writing will deteriorate sadly during the first year. In this there is no cause for alarm or despair; it is a very natural consequence of shifting one's point of view toward what one is doing. The very same seeming disaster overtakes the person who, having learned to play the piano by ear and without instruction, takes a thorough course in fingering and sight reading. For a while he cannot even play his old familiar pieces.











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